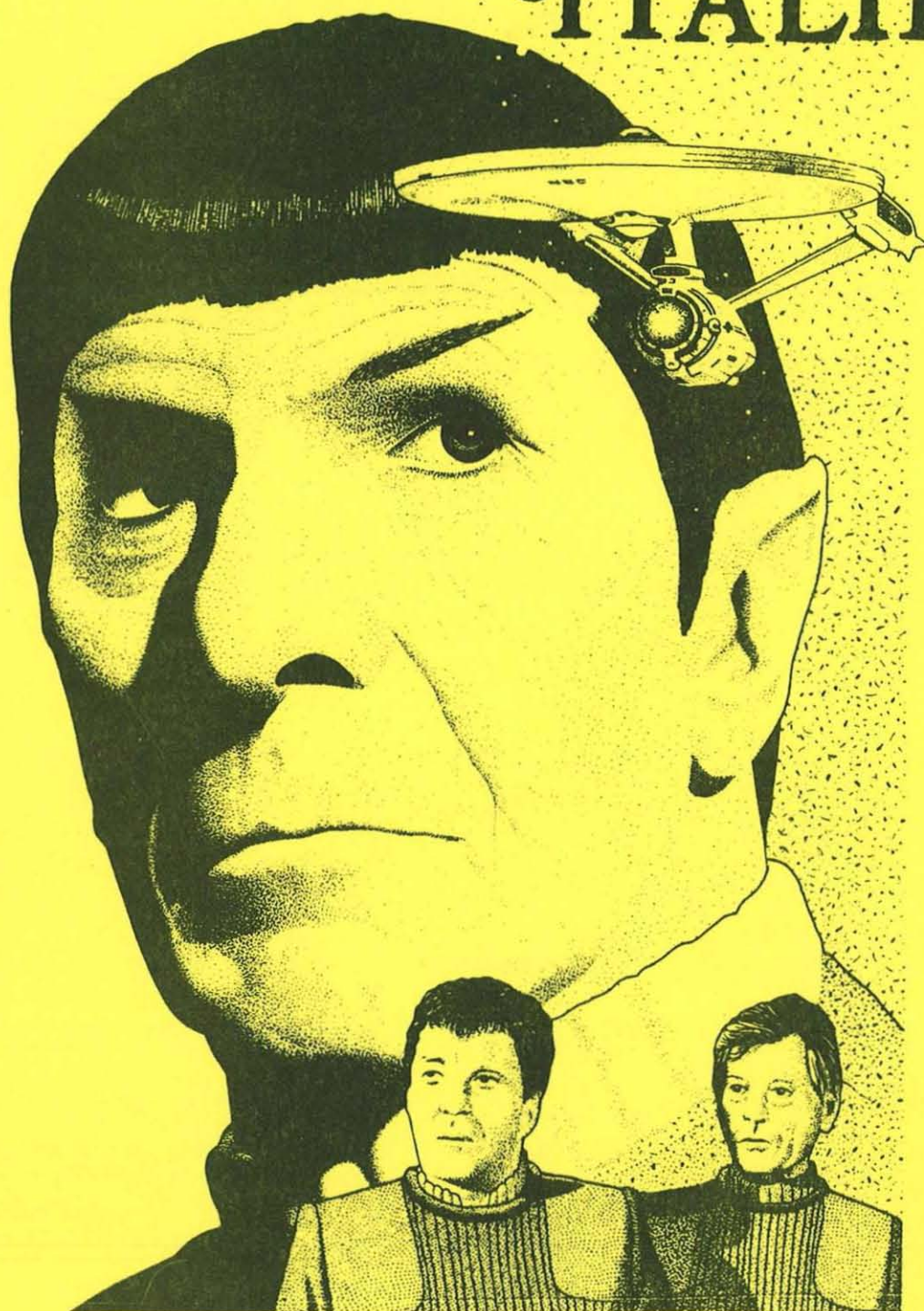


ScoTpress

CAPRICCIO ITALIEN



a
STAR TREK
fanzine

Sue Jones

CAPRICCIO ITALIEN

by

Sue Jones

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A ScoTpress publication

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CAPRICCIO ITALIEN: The ship picks up a Priority 1 call from Leonardo's Planet but when they get there everyone denies having sent it. Things, however, are not as peaceful as they seem.

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

"Live long and prosper, Spock."

"I shall do neither, for I have killed
my Captain and my friend."

Amok Time

"I am more an antique Roman than a Dane."

Hamlet: Act V Scene II

"Fourthly...

It is possible to die fired by care for a brother,
To die fired by hate for another,
Or to live, searching for logic and truth.
Which dost thou choose?"

from "The Questions of Surak to a Child Learning"
translated by Amanda Grayson,
collected by J.Y. Comben.

Affectionate thanks are due to the following people:

To Pam, (and Timiny too of course) - long-suffering friend.
For pizzas and encouragement, for picking holes in my
plot (Aargh!) and for the (very) extended loan of a
typewriter. It's your fault this got finished.
Thank you.

To Jackie - who said "Write!" (Your command is my wish!) For
casting a light on the subject, and for reminding me
of the existence of the comma!

PROLOGUE

Thin winter sunlight lacquered the landscape, grey leafless vines and straight dark taka trees. It lay in long pale bars across the room where a man lay dead.

Following local custom, he had been laid out awaiting burial. The girl who watched beside him held as still as the sunlight, a part of her mind shocked into retreat far beyond the cold brightness of the day.

The sound of the door latch roused her and she raised her head with the air of one returning from a great distance, anger kindling to replace the numbness behind her eyes at the sight of the figure in the doorway.

She looked a question, and he stood still, neither advancing nor retreating.

"I had to come."

"What for? To apologise?"

"No. I realise it runs too deep for that. I wanted at least to explain my reasons."

"You killed him," she said steadily. "You killed him as surely as if you had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger yourself."

He stood watching her, eyes guarded, face impassive.

"I assure you, such was not my intention. I wished only to help the people here. I wanted you to know that."

"Very well. You have explained and I have listened. Now please go."

He made as though to say something further, but her silence outfaced him and he withdrew. The sound of the door closing signalled release. Only then did she permit herself to cry.

CHAPTER I

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8705.1.

"Space, the final frontier... and indeed there can be few frontiers potentially more lethal or final than this. The Enterprise has once again been assigned to patrol the Neutral Zone which separates the Federation from the Klingon Empire. For the last month we have moved with silent caution along the boundaries of Federation space, occasionally shadowed by one of our Klingon opposite numbers. We know them all: Revenge; Swift Destruction; and Black Knife; but for the past week our sensors have detected nothing, and nerves are beginning to stretch..."

Captain James Kirk was aware of the tension crawling over his skin like bugs even as he sat. He glanced around at his bridge crew. His people were good, the best, and they were channelling the extra strain into hard, constructive work.

Chief Engineer Scott's station was vacant, but Kirk knew he was down in Engineering giving yet another hands-on check to his beloved 'bairns' and bringing additional terror to the heart of any of his junior officers foolish enough to believe that less than perfect might just be good enough.

Uhura, her lovely face intent, was running through the functions of the

communications board. Only one idly swinging leg betrayed her tension.

Every rule has the exception that proves it. Jim's lips twitched involuntarily as his eye lighted on Spock's dark head bent over the science computer. Unruffled and oblivious of the stress around him, Spock worked on, islanded by his own aura of calm.

In the well of the bridge below him Chekov, his attention focussed firmly on his controls, whistled softly and tunelessly between his teeth.

"Pavel, if the Lord had intended you to whistle, He'd have made you a canary," Sulu muttered. "Now let's get on with these calculations."

Jim smothered a smile and feigned deafness. Then he sighed - the time had come. It was a quiet watch and he really had no further excuse to remain where he was. Regretfully he rose to his feet.

"Mr. Spock, you have the con. I am going to my quarters to do battle with the real enemy of the Federation - paperwork!"

Not a muscle of the Vulcan's face flickered, but Jim grinned back in response to the gleam of amusement in the dark eyes.

"Truly a formidable opponent, Captain," Spock replied as he stepped down towards the centre seat.

Kirk returned to his quarters by what he mentally designated the 'Scenic Route', via Sickbay, Engineering, and the main Rec Room. 'C.B.W.A.' McCoy called it - 'Command By Wandering About'. Not only did it keep the Captain in touch with his ship, but it built trust by keeping the crew in more informal contact with the man upon whose decisions their lives ultimately depended.

The doors of the Rec Room swished open and Jim stepped nimbly aside as a body came flying through the air towards him. It landed with a less than gentle thump and an "Ouf!" of expelled air at his feet, and revealed itself as Crewman Summers. Behind him other crewpeople were swarming down ropes hanging from the gantry near the ceiling and racing across to join in what appeared to be a cross between an all-in wrestling match and a full-scale brawl. Scrambling to his feet, Summers recognised his Captain, sketched a gesture somewhere between a salute and a wave, and hurled himself with careless abandon back into the melee.

Jim watched fascinated for a few minutes before picking his way around the scrum, which periodically fired off a body like a badly directed rip-rap, and headed for Harb Tanzer's office.

Lt. Harb Tanzer, Head of Recreation, was bending over his computer console checking stock when Kirk appeared in the doorway. He looked up and grinned.

"Good morning, Captain. A cup of coffee?"

Jim returned the grin. Harb Tanzer did not believe in synthesized coffee. He believed in coffee beans, and kept a percolator in almost constant action at the back of his office. It was rumoured that strong men had threatened to kill for a taste of Harb's coffee. Jim accepted a chair and a steaming mug.

"Harb, what's going on out there?" he asked, indicating the mayhem with a jerk of his thumb. "It looks like the Battle of Organia without the benefit of the Organians."

A smile creased the corners of Tanzer's eyes. "It was Lt. Sulu's idea, sir."

"That figures," Kirk grunted.

"He thought that if people were getting twitchy at not being able to fight Klingons, they'd be better letting off steam fighting each other, and I'm inclined to agree. It's a sort of team game cum assault course."

"Hmm, I can see the assault."

"There are *some* rules attached - loosely - and if ever you want to fight a guerrilla war, well, you've got your guerrillas!"

"Thanks a lot, I'll remember that! Carry on, as long as I can have enough crew back in reasonable working order to run the Enterprise."

"Yes, sir. Apart from that there's only..."

The intercom whistled. "Captain Kirk to the bridge, please. Captain Kirk to the bridge."

Kirk hit the button. "I'm on my way." He turned to Tanzer with a rueful expression. "Sorry, Mr. Tanzer. I'll catch you later." Scooping his coffee cup from the table he downed the contents in one gulp and headed out of the door.

* * * * *

On the bridge the quality of the tension had changed. Now it had purpose and direction.

All this watching and waiting, look but don't touch, has been getting to us. Even Spock looks glad of a little action at last, Kirk thought in one breath as he stepped down towards his chair. In the second breath he opened his mouth to demand a status report, only to have Uhura intercept him.

"There's an A1 distress call coming in, but it's an old-style subspace radio frequency, sir. It's a chance in a million that we picked it up."

"Almost, Lieutenant, but not quite."

She smiled her acknowledgement of the compliment.

"Well, let's hope it's not like the last one," McCoy muttered fervently, sotto voce. "I prefer as little tribble in my life as possible."

Kirk winced at the pun and the memory it evoked and glanced at Spock. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he thought he saw his First Officer flinch.

"Okay. Where's it coming from, Uhura?"

"I'm afraid that's a little more difficult, sir. I'm trying to trace it back to source. I should have it in a few moments." There was a short pause while Uhura twiddled dials and made adjustments to her instruments, one hand pressed delicately to the receiver in her ear, her face absorbed. "Here it is now, sir. Planet PLG 530 - Leonardo's Planet."

Kirk raised his eyebrow in unconscious imitation of his First Officer. "Little Italy? Very well. Mr. Chekov, plot us a course for Leonardo's Planet."

"Course plotted and laid in, sair."

"Mr. Sulu, ahead warp factor five."

McCoy bounced on his heels and glanced from Spock to Kirk and back again. "Would someone please tell me what connection there is between a planet on the fringe of Klingon space and an old European country back on Earth?"

"A piece of apocrypha, Doctor," Spock replied, then seeing McCoy's baffled expression he relented. "The planet was among the first in this sector to be colonised, and at a time before the current systematic methods of cartography had been introduced."

"You mean when good old individuality still stood a chance," McCoy murmured, but Spock continued undeterred.

"The first landing party included a young Italian ensign by the name of Guiseppe Leonardo, who is reported to have observed at some considerable length that the climate and environment bore a marked resemblance to his native country, and in consequence, it is said, the planet was named after him." Spock's expression of mild distaste clearly indicated his opinion of such frivolity. "I have reason to doubt the veracity of the report," he added.

"But it makes a good story," Kirk finished for him.

"Colloquial in expression, Captain, but essentially correct."

"Good old Human sentiment - gets you right here," McCoy said, tapping his chest. "But then you wouldn't know about that, would you, Spock?" he finished wickedly, and Kirk braced himself for the next round.

Spock's eyebrow registered the hit but he refused to be diverted. "The fact remains that the star about which Leonardo's Planet orbits is slightly larger than Sol and the distribution of the main land masses is such that the majority enjoy a prolonged warm and largely rainless season, reminiscent of the conditions prevailing throughout the summer in the Mediterranean countries of Earth, which renders the sobriquet not inappropriate."

"Sounds idyllic," McCoy murmured.

"Except that now they've sent out a message warning us of planetary disaster," Jim reminded him quietly.

CHAPTER II

Lieutenant Sulu glanced back over his shoulder towards the command chair. "Approaching the Korrygane system now, Captain. ETA four minutes."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu," Kirk acknowledged. "Take us down to sublight speed. Mr. Spock, scanners at maximum range - I want to take a good hard look at this before we 'boldly go' anywhere."

"Aye, sir," both replied.

Sulu grinned. The publicity for the Enterprise, churned out by Starfleet public relations department, was a source of mild hysteria to her crew.

Leonardo's Planet, escorted by its twin moons, swung slowly on its axis like a jewel. A kingfisher planet of russet landmasses and iridescent blue seas, veined and marbled by spun tendrils of white cloud.

An innocent planet, Kirk thought, lacking as yet the satellites, space stations, repair facilities, docks and other man-made impedimenta which girdled the planets of most space-faring races. It was also, so far as the viewscreen indicated, devoid of any signs of disturbance.

He turned to face the science station. "Mr. Spock?"

"Sensors register no other vessels at this time, sir."

"Keep scanning."

Chief Engineer Scott stared gloomily at the viewscreen. "The sensor shadow of one of those moons'd be a bonnie place to hide a ship if you wanted to spring an ambush."

"It would indeed, Mr. Scott," Kirk said. "However, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Take us in, Mr. Sulu - but let's keep our eyes open."

Like an eagle wheeling down the wind the Enterprise swept past the first planet and leaned gently into orbit around the second. Jim paused to gather the attention of his bridge crew.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "What information to we have on Leonardo's Planet? Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan consulted his computer readouts. "The most recent survey of the planet was conducted by the USS Beagle fifty standard years ago. It is a Class M planet comparable in size to Earth. The atmosphere contains .001% more oxygen. Three major landmasses close to the equator. Currently the population of 40,000 is confined to the northern continent. Mineralogically it is comparatively poor, although there are deposits of coal, gold and iron in limited quantities and indications of what may prove to be oil-bearing strata in the unpopulated southern continent. Its chief asset and major source of revenue is its wine, Chianti Nuovo, which is exported all over the galaxy. It is," he concluded, "much prized by the discerning."

"Even on Vulcan?" McCoy demanded.

"I did say the discerning, Doctor."

"Drunken Vulcans," McCoy murmured pensively, his eyes lighting up; then his face fell once more. "On second thoughts, I don't suppose they're any more fun drunk than sober."

Kirk coughed meaningfully. "Gentlemen, can we save the wine tasting for later? What other information do you have, Spock?"

"Very little, Captain. Sensors show no indication of any bacteriological or viral infection, no harmful radiation, no geophysical or artificial disturbance of any kind."

"No earthquake, fire, flood or riot, huh?"

The Vulcan shook his head.

"In that case we had better ask them the reason for diverting a Starship. Uhura, who's the planetary governor?"

"Captain," Spock said quietly, "if I may remind you, regulations specifically state that in the case of an A1 emergency radio silence must be maintained until the nature of the emergency has been ascertained."

"Mr. Spock, if regulations can ascertain the nature of the emergency *without* breaking radio silence, I shall be only too happy to comply with them. But until then regulations will have to take a back seat." Jim Kirk raised a challenging eyebrow at his First Officer, who mirrored it with a more thoughtful expression.

"I would concur."

"There is no planetary governor as such, sir," Uhura said. "The Leonardan

equivalent is the Mayor of the main town, Marciana - a Mr. Barkley. They're patching me through to his office now."

The starfield on the viewscreen wavered and cleared to reveal a craggy-handsome face, its fair skin vivid with sunburn that swore at the mass of curly red hair above it. Jerom Barkley. He looked like a small boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He looked like somebody's kid brother or favourite nephew. McCoy tried to visualise him as the de facto governor of a frontier world and found himself grinning.

From his customary station behind the Captain's chair McCoy saw the jolt of surprise which tightened the shoulder muscles beneath the gold uniform shirt, but not a trace of it showed in Kirk's voice as he announced,

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise. Please state the nature of your emergency."

The man Barkley blinked, frowned, and then a grin spread like sunshine across his face. "Jim? Jim Kirk, as I live and breathe! Have you finally junked that blue poison of yours and come to get yourself a decent drink?" Obviously the two men were old acquaintances.

"Thanks, Jerom, but this is business. We picked up an A1 distress call on an old-style subspace radio frequency, transmitted from here. I must ask you to state the nature of your emergency, or explain why the code has been used."

A look of total confusion clouded the sunshine for a moment. "Sorry, Jim, wrong planet. The nearest thing to a disaster that I know of is the drubbing I took in the council session last week. But I think they still call that politics, don't they?" Then, seeing Kirk's frown, "All joking part, Jim, we've had no trouble here. We're a peaceful farming community, and folk leave us alone, both Federation and Empire." He spread his hands. "I ask you, do I look as though I'm standing in the midst of smoking ruins?"

"No, but I'm afraid that it's not quite that simple, Jerom. My orders give me no leeway at all in this. The priority A1 distress call is the most urgent emergency signal there is. Every use of it has to be fully investigated, and if I find that there has been an abuse, then I may have to take some official action."

The smile this time was rueful. "Okay, okay, Jim, I get the picture. Far be it from me to impede the progress of bureaucracy. The powers-that-be love reports; I know - I have to write 'em too. Come and make all the checks you want. I'll even buy you a drink while you're down here. When are you coming?"

"As soon as possible."

"Fair enough. Give me ten minutes to speak to my people and they'll give you the co-ordinates for beam down." He broke the link.

Kirk swung down from his command chair. "Mr. Spock, with me. Bones, this looks like some kind of technical cock-up, but I want one of your department with us, just in case."

"You got me, Jim. If that wine is half as good as Spock reckons, I'll waive my rule on house calls."

Kirk chuckled as he hit the intercom button. "Security team report to the transporter room. Mr. Scott, you have the con. It looks peaceful enough, but at the first sign of trouble you get my ship out of here. The landing party is expendable, the ship is not."

"Aye, sir. I'll keep a weather eye open for squalls."

"Good man. The rest of the landing party meet in the transporter room in eight minutes."

CHAPTER III

They materialised in sunlight so brilliant as to make the Enterprise men squint, and Kirk found himself envying Spock his inner eyelid, which flicked across to defend him from the worst of the glare. Light and heat impaled them with their force, echoing and re-echoing from the paving and whitewashed walls until the air around them quivered like a living thing. From the corner of his eye Kirk saw Spock draw himself up and look around appreciatively. McCoy did a quick survey of the houses around them and shuffled his feet restively.

"If we're supposed to be visiting the Mayor, why'n hell didn't they give us proper co-ordinates instead of having us set down somewhere in the boondocks?"

Jim was asking himself much the same question, but before he could answer the doctor a gleaming dark shape rolled to a halt on silent tyres beside them. Graceful gull-wing doors lifted and the man from the viewscreen descended, hand outstretched in welcome.

"Jim Kirk, good to see you again!" Barkley shook Kirk's hand firmly.

"And you, Jerom. Allow me to present my officers. First Officer and Science Officer, Mr. Spock." Spock inclined his head with his customary grace. "And my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy." The handshake between the two men was warmly cordial.

"That's quite some transport you've got there, Mr. Barkley," McCoy remarked. "It's an old Earth-type limousine, isn't it?"

"Jerom, please, Doctor; and yes, it is. Nothing but the best for our VIPs. We're very tradition-minded here, but I admit it also serves a more practical purpose. I find it raises far less dust than an air car, and on this planet you've no idea how much of a luxury that can be. I must apologise for the unusual beam down point, but I'm afraid we're also devils for pomp and circumstance. People wouldn't have been able to see me give you a proper ceremonial welcome if I'd let you land on the doorstep, so to speak, and that would never do. Now shall we go, gentlemen? Another car will be along in a minute to collect your men, Jim."

The ride was smooth and brief. Kirk had no time to gather more than a general impression of neat whitewashed houses set amidst tranquil streets and open piazzas when the vehicle slowed and drew to a halt.

"If you are willing, gentlemen, we'll walk from here," Barkley said. "The piazza is not built to take traffic of any kind."

A flight of steps, wide and shallow, led to the main square, a few small shops with shaded doorways and plain awnings, low-built houses, their shutters half closed against the midday glare, and between high garden walls, where flowering creepers rioted in profusion. Total normality washed around them, drowsy and sunlit.

Just like Omicron Ceti III, Kirk thought grimly. Barkley and McCoy were chatting easily. Under cover of their voices Kirk dropped back a couple of paces.

"Spock, is there any chance that what we're seeing is an illusion, and something is tampering with our minds?"

Spock considered for a moment. "That possibility had occurred to me also,

Captain. However, I have exercised my mental disciplines without any change in perception, so I must conclude that either the illusion is created by something entirely foreign to our experience, or that what we see is in fact reality."

Ahead of them a group of women were drawing water from a low-lipped well, children squealing and splashing in the overspill from the buckets. Barkley looked a trifle embarrassed, and spread his hands deprecatingly.

"We're not really as primitive as this looks, Doctor, but in summer the levels of drinking water get a bit low, so the well helps out with water for cooking and washing."

McCoy smiled. "No problem there that I can see, provided the water's boiled. But isn't it a touch dangerous? If one of those youngsters got venturesome they could fall in and break their necks, or drown."

The other man shrugged. "I suppose they could, but we've never had a problem so far. Most of the time they don't bother with it. It's just a large hole in the ground where their elders meet for a chat." He broke off to call a greeting to one of the women, but she failed to hear him and walked away. He grinned and shrugged again.

"Well, that shows one thing - I shall have to practice my voice projection before the next hustings. In the meantime, gentlemen," he gestured towards the large building which formed one side of the square, "welcome to my home."

Viewed from the square the plain facade and tall windows shuttered against the sun were not very impressive. Inside, the Enterprise men followed Barkley through long, low-ceilinged rooms, their light paintwork stark against exposed beams, across cool marbled floors islanded with rugs and pieces of furniture of an age and quality that made Kirk revise his opinion of Leonardo's Planet as a backwoods world.

If the rest of the house was something of a showpiece the study was purely functional, although furnished with the same exquisite taste. Barkley swept a handful of papers off a cluttered desk and waved them to seats.

Kirk and McCoy accepted the offered chairs, but Spock continued to prowl the room with the even tread of a hunting cat, pausing to inspect - though not to touch - the ornaments in the display cases. McCoy watched him for a few moments, winked at Kirk, and raised his voice slightly.

"Mr. Spock, did your mother never tell you it's rude to stare?"

"Certainly, Doctor," Spock replied placidly, "although the reference is, I believe, more suitably applied to people than to objects. I am merely expressing due admiration for Mr. Barkley's extremely fine collection of porcelain. Myr's ware from Cestos III is it not, sir?" This last was addressed to Barkley, who was turning from the drinks cabinet with his hands full of glasses.

"Indeed it is, Mr. Spock. May I compliment you on your discerning eye."

"It must pay well to be mayor of your town," McCoy commented. "That stuff's worth a king's ransom."

"You must be joking!" Barkley chuckled. He distributed drinks and subsided into an armchair. "But I will confess to being fortunate with my business interests. Now then, Jim, what's all this about a priority A1 distress call?"

Kirk repeated his earlier explanation. At the end of it Barkley waved a vague hand that encompassed the room where they sat, the house, and the town beyond.

"Like I said, do we look as though we're in the middle of a disaster?"

Kirk grinned. "No."

"Well in that case, wouldn't it be more sensible just to forget the whole thing?"

"At the risk of sounding monotonous, Jerom, I'm afraid it's not that simple. The call has already been logged. The A1 distress call is the most urgent distress signal there is; any use of it has to be accounted for, and any abuse may result in prosecution."

"Jim, you know as well as I do that mistakes are made. So some eager beaver at your end got it wrong. Forgive the bad joke, but the world won't fall apart."

"It will if I go around saying things like that about my Communications Officer and she gets to hear about it. She's very good at her job."

"Okay, you win. You never were one for a quiet life, and you won't let other people have one either. I'll take you round to our sub-space transmitting station and you can see for yourself why I'm so convinced that the call never came from here."

* * * * *

A quick call on his own account resulted in Barkley arranging for them to meet both pairs of station staff and their relief with whom they normally alternated duties. They were competent and extremely co-operative, though somewhat overwhelmed by their illustrious visitors.

Yes, the station was manned at all times. No, no such call had been made from there. If the Captain cared to look he could check for himself. The Captain looked. All calls were meticulously logged. There was definitely no record of an A1 distress call.

"Okay," said Jim eventually, "I know that officially the station is manned at all times. How about unofficially? I'm more concerned with tracing this transmission than I am about minor infringements of regulations. As far as we can tell, it was made about three months ago; was there any period, however brief, around that time when this equipment was left unmonitored - just long enough for that call to be made?"

The group exchanged glances, then the senior operator shook his head. "No, sir. This station handles a lot of local business and non-urgent calls, but it's our sole means of answering emergency calls. None of us would have left it unmanned, even for a few moments."

There was a general nodding of heads and murmurs of agreement.

"That's it, then," McCoy said as they walked downstairs from the offices. "No distress call and no clues. You know, old Horatio Nelson got it right. 'I see no signal.' If Uhura picks up another of these things, I shall suggest that she does the same."

Kirk quelled him with a glance. "Is there no other transmitter on the planet with sufficient power to put out a call like that?" he asked Barkley.

"What of the scientific survey party?" Spock put in quietly. "It is normal Federation practice to provide such a team with a sufficiently powerful transmitter in case of emergencies."

Barkley considered briefly. "You know, you could well be right. They keep

themselves to themselves so much that to be honest we tend to forget that they're there at all. I'll get on to it for you now, and we can take a drive up there."

"It would be quicker by transporter," Spock observed.

"Ah, but nowhere near as pleasant."

"I'll second that," McCoy agreed.

In the event they could not set out straight away. A message came through on the car radio as the vehicle moved away to say that the central transmitting office was unable to contact the scientists. Barkley acknowledged the message, adding the injunction, "Keep trying."

"Not that it's anything untoward, Jim," he stressed.

"Guess my paranoia was showing, huh?" Kirk said, laughing a little wryly.

"A little," Barkley chuckled. "Seriously though, Jim, they're a small team, largely self-sufficient. To tie up one of their members monitoring radio frequencies when he could be doing something useful wouldn't be logical."

Kirk gave an undignified snort of laughter hastily amended to a cough. McCoy's delighted whoop was unsuppressed.

"Hey, Jerom, you'd better move over here away from Spock. I do believe he's corrupting you!"

CHAPTER IV

On their return Kirk discreetly buttonholed his First Officer in the flower-filled garden. "Do you know anything at all about this scientific team?" he asked hopefully.

Spock nodded. "A little, Captain. I pulled the basic records which the Enterprise carries before we left."

Kirk smiled at him warmly. "I should have known that was a silly question. Go on," he prompted.

"The group comprises five scientists, all Earth-Human, although I believe Dr. Taylor was raised in the Martian colonies. His scientific background, although respectable, is less extensive than those of his colleagues; however his administrative experience is greater, which makes him an appropriate organiser and leader for the team. Of the remaining four Dr. Endicott is possibly the most interesting. He is the youngest member of the team, but if the promise of his early work has been fulfilled he should have developed into a very competent geologist."

"That seems to be a helluva lot of Federation scientific brainpower to tie up on a planet that is 'mineralogically unimportant'."

"I would agree. Initial reports implied the possibility of mineral deposits which would have been of some immediate financial benefit and which would have offset the cost of further research, but so far nothing of that nature has been forthcoming."

Spock broke off abruptly, and after a few moments Kirk heard the noise that sensitive Vulcan ears had already detected, the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. They turned to see Barkley advancing upon them looking exceedingly pleased with himself.

"Success! I've spoken to Dr. Taylor and said that you wanted to see him. I'll leave you to explain the whys and wherefores. To be honest, I'm not sure that he'll really care. I mentioned Mr. Spock's name and he became positively effusive, and began muttering something about getting your opinion on some obscure test, not one word of which I understood. I suggest we eat first and then drive up there, so if you'll excuse me..." and he hustled away again without waiting for an answer. His voice could be heard fading away into the distance giving instructions to his staff.

Kirk and Spock exchanged amused glances and started to walk back towards the house.

* * * * *

The heat of the day lay heavy across the land, and the limousine crawled like a black-backed beetle along a road that shimmered like water in the distance. Kirk stared out of the window at the serried ranks of vines, their leaves hanging limp and heavy in the moveless air, and wondered why in the face of such obvious peace and tranquillity feelings of doubt and uncertainty continued to march like armies of ghostly centipedes down his spine.

Surprisingly they were greeted on arrival not by Dr. Taylor but by his deputy, Dr. Phillips, a quietly spoken young man with a fringe of nondescript blond hair that tended to flop into his eyes, and a nervous habit of bobbing his head like an apologetic rooster.

"It's very good to see you people, Captain," he said, shaking hands energetically all round and ushering them indoors.

"Thank you," Kirk replied, valiantly resisting the urge to bob in sympathy.

"I'm sorry Dr. Taylor isn't here to greet you in person, but he's been slightly delayed. However, I'd be very pleased to show you around. We've achieved some great things here."

"We certainly have!"

Dr. Phillips positively jumped at the interruption and fell deferentially silent.

"Dr. Taylor," the newcomer introduced himself. He extended a hand to Kirk and McCoy, then turned solemnly to Spock, his right hand raised, the paired fingers spread. "Mehe nakkhet ur-seveh, Mr. Spock," he said in what even Kirk recognised as excellently accented Vulcan.

Spock returned the salute gravely. "May you also live long and prosper, Dr. Taylor."

"And now, gentlemen," Dr. Taylor continued, "I know Starfleet doesn't give you time for social visiting, so suppose you tell me in what way I can help you."

Feeling rather like a recorded message, Kirk once more outlined the circumstances leading up to their visit. Dr. Taylor listened attentively and without interruption until he had finished, then nodded sympathetically.

"I appreciate your problem, gentlemen, and we are of course always pleased to co-operate with Starfleet in any way we can. I believe the equipment we have does possess the necessary power to transmit a call such as you describe, but that is probably about as much help as I can give you. You see, I'm afraid we haven't kept records of radio usage, nor is the station continuously manned. I do not for one moment think that any of us would make a hoax call, but anyone at all could transmit a signal from here if they so chose, and we would be none the

wiser. But perhaps it would be better if I simply showed you the equipment and then you can see for yourself."

Kirk gritted his teeth and accepted, smiling politely. He was beginning to doubt the instinct which had prompted him to press the investigation. He knew that Barkley considered the whole business to be a fool's errand, and the fact that Dr. Taylor was now treating him with the kindly condescension he would show towards the harmlessly deranged did nothing at all to improve his temper.

The transmitter, housed in the dormitory block, was indeed powerful enough to have produced the untraced signal but, lacking any form of recording system or log, told them nothing. Spock made a few checks, more, Kirk suspected, to protect his Captain's dignity than from any real expectation of finding something new.

He who expecteth nothing shall not be disappointed, Kirk thought sourly, watching his First Officer sit back in his chair with an expression of studied impassivity which signalled his dissatisfaction quite clearly to those who knew him well.

"A pity to have had a wasted journey, Captain," Taylor said, sounding faintly smug.

Jim resisted the urge to feel foolish. Starship command offered its fair share of embarrassing moments as well as heroic ones, and it must be almost irresistible to a civilian, whose work was funded and therefore controlled by the 'Fleet, to see one of its representatives fall flat on his face.

"Not perhaps a completely wasted journey." Startled by the unexpected interruption everyone turned to look at Dr. Phillips, who until then had stood silently to one side of the group. "What I mean is..." He paused and reddened under the sudden scrutiny. "Mr. Spock is Science Officer on the Enterprise; he may find some aspects of our work here of interest."

"Indeed," Spock agreed with some alacrity. "The records we have on board ship are fifty years old. Any additional information which you are able to provide would be an asset."

"In that case," Dr. Taylor said, "I should be delighted to escort you round the project. I have some data on which I would value your opinion, if you have the time."

The confirmatory glance thrown in Kirk's direction verged on the perfunctory. Spock's scientific curiosity, once roused, was a force to be reckoned with, and Jim did not intend to try. He nodded assent, and the three scientists forged ahead towards the work area talking animatedly, with Kirk, McCoy and Barkley trailing behind.

The Governor and the Doctor had struck up an easy friendship, and were discussing matters far removed from geology, which left Kirk free to gaze around him and absorb impressions. There was plenty to absorb and impress. The office and laboratory blocks were neat and well equipped, although perhaps slightly dated by the Enterprise's standards.

Spock's party went into a little huddle over a computer terminal, and Kirk let his mind drift. He returned to reality in time to hear Dr. Taylor say,

"It's a pity Dr. Sheng and Dr. Dubois aren't here to appreciate your observations, Mr. Spock. Most astute, and I'm sure they'd be interested, but I'm afraid they're away on a field trip," and Spock's reply,

"I understood that this was a five-man team."

"Indeed it was, until Dr. Endicott died."

There followed several breaths' worth of silence before Kirk managed to ask as normally as possible, "When did that happen?"

"Three months ago," Dr. Phillips interjected all in a rush, as though he was afraid that someone was going to stop him.

"You never mentioned this before, Dr. Taylor," Kirk said.

"I didn't see the need." Then with dawning incredulity, "Oh Captain Kirk, surely you're not trying to make a connection between your - forgive me - your wild goose chase and Dr. Endicott's death?"

"Not necessarily."

"Nevertheless, suppose you tell us precisely how he died," McCoy put in from the sidelines.

"Very well. It was a tragic business. I blame myself to a large extent. Before it happened I allowed individual members of the team to go off and work alone. I knew the area that Trevian - Dr. Endicott - was working in was dangerous. The rock structure was inherently unstable and prone to slippage, but he was a sensible young man and knew the risks involved, or so I thought.

"We only knew that there was something wrong when he failed to make a routine check-in call. We started a search immediately and found him under the rock slide. He'd been dead for hours. He carried a small personal transmitter, but he had no chance to call for help, much less put out hoax disaster alerts." Dr. Taylor looked away abruptly, and Jim saw the jerk of his throat as he swallowed convulsively.

McCoy moved silently across the room to lay a friendly hand on the other man's shoulder. "Y'know, twenty-twenty hindsight is a wonderful gift. Dr. Endicott might have been alive today if you'd ordered someone else to go with him, or there might have been two men lying dead under that rockfall."

"He's right, Dr. Taylor," Kirk agreed. "I'm sorry to have put you through that, but I had to know."

Taylor forced a smile. "I understand, and thank you for your understanding."

They took their leave shortly after, Dr. Taylor offering to have duplicate tapes made of their records for inclusion in the Enterprise's scientific data banks.

The return journey passed without incident. Kirk watched the rush of the countryside past the window and listened with half an ear as Spock, with laudable restraint, provided Barkley and McCoy with a low-tech description of the work being conducted at the geology base. The other part of his mind turned over the events of the visit. They moved disjointedly before his inner eye like figures caught under a strobe light; sudden flashes of memory, blindingly clear but apparently unconnected. 'We have achieved great things here.' In spite of the fact that according to all reports there was nothing to be achieved. Dr. Taylor's smug expression when sympathising over their wasted journey warred with his obvious distress over Dr. Endicott's death. *Yet one may smile and smile and be a villain*, Kirk thought ruefully, *and not only in Denmark*.

Then there was Dr. Phillips' reaction to Dr. Taylor. Kirk was accustomed to some of his subordinates regarding him with respect which caused them to be nervous in his presence, but never, he hoped, to react with the kind of terror which had flashed for one brief moment in Phillips' eyes. Then again, maybe he

thought he had exceeded his authority, and Taylor almost certainly had a vicious tongue.

Which brought him back to Dr. Endicott's death and the emphasis Phillips had placed on the date it had occurred, and what, if anything, that had to do with their mysterious signal. There had to be logic and a pattern to it somewhere, but it was too obscure as yet for him to fathom it.

The car deposited them at the gates on their return. Strolling companionably back towards the house along gravel paths bordered with neat grass verges and brilliant flower beds, Barkley plucked one of the exotic blooms, tucking it lovingly into his buttonhole.

"You must pardon me my eccentric home which requires my guests to walk while their host picks flowers. I intended to have a driveway constructed to the back of the house since the front faces the piazza, but now I find I would miss all this too much, and so we're stuck with walking. The only consolation I can offer is that the exercise must do us good."

"Looks like we're not the only ones getting some exercise." McCoy nodded in the direction of the house, where some of the domestic staff were arranging long tables on the patio.

Barkley looked a trifle shame-faced. "Ah yes, my little surprise. I hope you'll forgive me, Jim. As I'm sure you'll have noticed, being so close to the Neutral Zone we're not exactly the cultural centre of the universe. Good company's hard to come by, and new faces and ideas a luxury. I took the liberty of inviting my fellow councillors to dine in the hope that you'd be able to spare enough time from your ship duties to join us."

Jim sighed inwardly. It had been a long and frustrating day. The last thing he wanted was to make polite table-talk at a formal dinner with the leading lights of Leonardo's Planet, but the definition of what constitutes the duties of a Starship Captain is extremely broad, so instead he slipped into what McCoy referred to as his 'diplomat mode', donned his most affable smile and said, "It'll be a pleasure, Jerom."

"How about you, Doctor?"

McCoy scowled. "You speak for yourself, Jim. It means I've got to climb into that damned neckbrace again. You don't know what you're asking, Jerom."

Spock raised an eyebrow and retrieved the situation with an aplomb worthy of his ambassador father. "The good doctor is, I believe, referring to his dress uniform, to which he has developed an unaccountable aversion."

"Well, it may be unaccountable to you, Spock, but I still say it's an instrument of torture designed by head-nodding yes-men. One of these days I'm gonna shake my head and find I've slit my own throat on the collar."

"As you are so fond of observing, Doctor," Spock replied calmly, "a little suffering is good for the soul."

Barkley laughed delightedly. "I take it then that the answer's yes."

"It is," McCoy agreed.

"And you two gentlemen?"

Jim nodded and managed to catch Spock's eye as he answered, "Certainly. I'll see you later."

CHAPTER V

For a Vulcan the solution to a difficult problem is usually to be found at the end of a period of logical thought and deep meditation, accompanied if possible by physical repose and tranquillity. That, Spock recognised, was not the case for all species and therefore, in keeping with the tenets of IDIC, he was seated with his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, his hands steepled before him, patiently watching his Captain circle the room like a blow-fly.

On his fifth circuit Jim Kirk came to rest by the window. Leaning his arm against the frame he looked out into the evening garden. Korrygane was sinking, its last rays spilling like liquid gold into the walled enclosure, setting the shadows running loose from every tree and bush. Jim saw none of it, his mind tossing and worrying at something for which he had as yet no name. Eventually he turned from the window to face his First Officer.

"I suppose one of those radio operators could have made that call for pure mischief," he said at last.

"They could, but such illogical behaviour accords ill with their otherwise extremely responsible attitude."

"Yeah, you're right. Besides, it's a big coincidence that Dr. Endicott was killed just after that call was made. I can't give you a logical reason for it, Spock, but I'm certain those two events are tied in together somewhere."

"I would agree."

"You? I thought you didn't believe in hunches?"

"I am not sanguine about 'hunches'. Vulcans are not a naturally intuitive people. However, intuition is recognised as a command prerogative, and I would not willingly throw away a useful tool simply because I do not care for the design. Your intuition has served us well in the past, and I believe the odds are in favour of it doing so again."

Jim grinned. "Care to quote them?"

Spock's face took on the abstracted look of a man beginning a calculation. Kirk hastily raised a hand.

"On second thoughts, don't answer that, but thanks for the vote of confidence."

"In addition," Spock continued, "when Dr. Phillips shook hands I sensed he was..." he paused, seeking a word which would define the emotion he had experienced, "I believe the phrase you might use is 'on edge'."

"Yes, I had noticed that. Still, it stands to reason, I suppose. For all he knew we could have been there with orders to close the project down, and Taylor's enough to make anyone nervous."

Spock shook his head. "I have expressed myself badly. If anything our presence was a relief to him. I should more accurately have said he was terrified."

Kirk looked up sharply. "What of?" he demanded.

"The contact was fleeting and the emotion non-specific."

Jim sighed and fell silent, considering the implications of this latest piece of information. Finally he shifted restlessly. "It's no use. We keep finding more and more damn questions and none of the answers."

Spock nodded thoughtfully. "Since it appears that most of the questions raised relate in some degree to the geological team, a closer examination of the base may prove useful."

"A little judicious breaking and entering, huh?"

Spock looked faintly pained. "That is not precisely the expression I would have chosen, Captain."

"Fair enough. How about burglary?" Kirk suggested with a wicked grin. "But while you're making up your mind, we'd better get downstairs for this damned dinner."

* * * * *

"I thought we might eat out on the terrace," Barkley said when the Enterprise officers rejoined him. "Moonrise is supposed to be one of the great sights of our planet."

"It certainly is impressive," McCoy agreed, looking though the open French windows to where the twin moons hung like Chinese lanterns low in the sky, so close as to seem almost touching.

"Yeah. The first settlers here called them Romulus and Remus, for obvious reasons, but it caused so much confusion with ch'Rihan and ch'Havran* that some wag nicknamed them Walrus and Carpenter, and I'm afraid the names just stuck."

Both Kirk and McCoy laughed. The repressive quality of Spock's silence spoke volumes.

"Now then, Jim," Barkley said, and led the way out onto the lamplit patio, "I want you to meet my deputy, Braddon McClusky, and the rest of my Council colleagues." Introductions followed.

Kirk linked names to faces automatically, smiling and nodding politely. To confuse the names of two faceless politicians is the stuff that interplanetary incidents are made of, and he had learned to avoid it. Not that these men were in that sense faceless, but there was a certain similarity between them, a sturdy independence born of a lifetime of battling adversity, hostile weather, hostile aliens, and occasionally a hostile bureaucracy.

The meal was well served and excellent, and Jim found his fellow guests to have incisive minds and a surprisingly comprehensive grasp of interplanetary politics. Eventually servants came to remove dishes and offer cheese and fruit.

Leaning forward to refill Kirk's glass Barkley said, "We've been experimenting with herding Vulcan tricorns on some of our more arid uplands, and the cheese we've been getting is excellent. Perhaps you'd care to try some, Len?"

McCoy glanced up at the young man standing patiently at his elbow, cheeseboard in hand, and found himself looking at the bifurcated eyebrows and unmistakably swarthy features of a Klingon. Too shocked to do anything more than nod his head, his eyes met Barkley's in mute appeal for him to deny the evidence before him.

Barkley met the Doctor's startled gaze with one of wide-eyed innocence until the Klingon had withdrawn, then collapsed helpless with laughter. Finally he pulled himself together a little and mopped his streaming eyes.

* Romulus and Remus of the Romulan system. c.f. My Enemy My Ally by Diane Duane.

"I'm sorry, Len, but your face..." was as far as he got before another paroxysm of mirth overwhelmed him.

McCoy, not one whit offended, waited until his host had regained a measure of control before he said, "Don't think I'm being picky, Jerom, but had you noticed you've got a Klingon waiting at table?"

Barkley nodded a trifle breathlessly. "Yes, Khoor has handed one or two people a shock. I can't speak for his parentage. As you have already observed, Doctor, we are virtually on the border of the Neutral Zone, and 'There are stranger things in heaven and earth, Horatio' than a mixed marriage. But I can say that Khoor is as Leonardan as I am, and has been a loyal member of my staff for more years than I care to count."

"Hmph!" The snort came from Brad McCluskey, his hands busy with tobacco and pipe. "And you know my feelings on that, Barkley. A man should show a little loyalty to his own kind." He looked around vaguely as though seeking somewhere to spit, recollected where he was, and thought better of it. Instead he lit up and from behind the ensuing smoke screen remarked coldly, "You know perfectly well what I mean."

Barkley looked at Kirk and made a small helpless gesture that was half unspoken apology and half plea for tolerance in the face of the other man's bigotry. Silence stretched uncomfortably for a few more moments, then with slightly forced cheerfulness Barkley said, "So tell me, Jim, what are you going to do now that hopefully we've convinced you that our world isn't literally crumbling beneath our feet?"

Kirk set down his glass and smiled back. "Oh, we'll be sticking around for a few days yet, Jerom. Bones wants to run tests and checks on quite a few of your people."

Out of the corner of his eye Jim caught McCoy's blink of surprise which translated as "I do?" Surprised he might be, but for all his protests that he was a doctor not a secret agent McCoy had known his Captain for more years than enough. If Jim Kirk announced that McCoy wanted to complete tests, then he wanted to complete tests. Explanations would follow in good time. Therefore he nodded agreement with a fair degree of aplomb.

Barkley threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Oh come on now, Jim! I know we're a border world, but we're hardly the back of beyond. Our own medical care is more than adequate."

"I couldn't agree more," McCoy said, "but it's part of Starfleet regulations that visiting Starships have a particular responsibility for the welfare of the inhabitants of frontier and border worlds, so I'm afraid we're stuck with it. It's no reflection on your people, Jerom. I'll bet they do a superb job, but the facilities we have on board the Enterprise are the equal of any in the galaxy, and there may be one or two people who are doing all right now, but who might fare even better with a little extra help."

There was a general pause while the councillors digested that one, then Barkley said, "Sounds fair enough to me. I'll introduce you to Colin Furmidge tomorrow. He's our leading consultant in overall charge of the hospital. You'll be able to arrange things with him."

Much later when, mellowed with good food and wine, the guests had departed, Kirk walked slowly up the broad staircase with Barkley heading towards the guest quarters.

Halfway up the Governor stopped, swaying gently. "Hope Brad didn't upset

you too much earlier, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head. "He didn't intend to be offensive," he replied.

"That's good. It's just that, well, I know Starfleet doesn't have much time for that kind of prejudice. Brad's a good man, but sometimes it's better not to take too much notice of what he says - especially if, like me, he's had too much to drink," he finished with a chuckle. And with that the Planetary Governor completed his weary climb and steered a more or less straight course towards his room and bed.

CHAPTER VI

Kirk entered his First Officer's darkened room without knocking to find Spock standing, a watchful shadow, by the long window wearing his suitably anonymous civilian clothing with the precision of a uniform. Kirk grinned affectionately at his friend. Espionage would never be Spock's natural metier.

"We're going to have to 'borrow' an aircar, you know. The entrance to the Governor's garage is too well lit to be safe to try, and as far as this planet is concerned you and I are safely tucked up in our beds without a suspicious thought to our names. If anyone is monitoring the Enterprise's frequency we don't want a lot of clandestine ship-to-shore beaming giving them the wrong idea."

Spock's face was invisible, but in the ensuing silence Kirk's mind's eye supplied the lifted eyebrow before the Vulcan answered, "I would suggest leaving this way, sir. Whatever guards there may be do not appear to have considered the possibility of anyone trying to break out. We should not attract undue attention."

Outside Walrus and Carpenter hung round and golden as ripe apricots in a sky of deepening lavender. The two men skirted the fringes of the moonwashed garden, clinging to the shadows. The wrought iron gate at the garden's end looked innocuous, but could easily be alarmed. Kirk flipped a mental coin and headed for a section of the wall where flowering creeper flamed in brilliant abundance. Spock scanned it with a prudently silenced tricorder and nodded agreement. Hauling himself up Kirk peered cautiously over the top. The street and the piazza beyond were deserted, with the exception of a cat which crouched and spat, eyeing him balefully before continuing about its own affairs.

Luck seemed to be running with them. A quick circuit of the square yielded a house with an unlocked garage containing an aircar.

"You know, I rather like this planet. Things are simpler, easier to manage," Jim remarked. He sensed rather than heard the small sigh which escaped the Vulcan in response to his teasing.

"I believe you have expressed such sentiments before, with deleterious results."

An aching memory stirred in Kirk's mind. Edith. Deleterious results, indeed. Expression of grief was both right and necessary, but at the proper time, and the dead of night in the midst of stealing an aircar was emphatically not the proper time. He quashed the memory relentlessly, leaned into the vehicle to release the brake on the small wheels which permitted it to manoeuvre when grounded, and put his shoulder to the door frame. Spock matched his action on the other side, and between them they succeeded in rolling the car silently outside.

Even by moonlight it was apparent why the owners had not concerned themselves unduly with the security of their vehicle. Still, 'borrowers' could

not be choosers, and its dilapidated appearance was more than adequate explanation to any curious eyes as to why two men should be pushing a grounded aircar down the main street.

Away from the immediate vicinity of the house Spock plunged head and shoulders under the maintenance hatch and tinkered with the engine, apparently to good effect, for after one balky false start it burst into throbbing - if somewhat uneven - life.

Kirk slipped behind the wheel and grinned wickedly at his First officer. "Okay, let's see if my driving's improved any."

But if the Vulcan had any reservations about taking his place in the passenger seat, he kept them to himself.

They passed several vehicles and a couple of late-night strollers, none of whom paid them the slightest attention. Beyond the town it was easier still. They saw several lights from homesteads set back from the road amongst their even rows of vines, but encountered neither traffic nor pedestrians. Gradually the road began to twist and climb, and trees advanced down the hillside to meet it until they drove between forested hills rising from the roadside.

Kirk was slowing to gather his bearings when Spock remarked quietly, "If my estimation is correct the geologists' base is approximately point seven five of a mile on the other side of that ridge. It may be advisable to approach on foot to avoid detection."

Kirk sighed quietly and forbore to ask him whether or not he could also draw them a route map. 'Never,' as McCoy always said, 'look a gift Vulcan in the ears.' Obediently Kirk pulled off the road, cut the engine, and doused the lights.

As they left the vehicle the immense quietness closed around them. The trees grew thickly, the space beneath them filled with a darkness so intense as to be almost palpable. Kirk paused to allow his eyes to adjust, but Spock moved ahead with obvious confidence, so Kirk followed him, trusting to the Vulcan's superior night vision to prevent them both from breaking their necks.

It was cool and damp beneath the trees. As they scuffed across the carpet of fallen needles the air filled with a spicy resinous smell, reminiscent of cedars. Gradually Kirk grew accustomed to the dark, and he could distinguish the hillside with its close-ranked trees, rising up in silhouette against a sky pricked out with stars. The ground rose, dipped slightly, and rose once more, then the trees ended abruptly and Kirk found himself looking out at the geologists' base, the scent of cedars in his nostrils.

Lights still showed in the dormitory building, but the nearer block, which housed the laboratories and offices, lay in darkness, with the exception of an old-style electric bulb over the main entrance. A narrow strip of grass and a width of gravel separated it from where the Enterprise men stood. The entry light was a mixed blessing, for while it made the door itself impractical as a means of entry it cast the sides of the building into a deeper shadow.

They crossed the gravel at a pace which agonised Kirk even as he recognised the need for it, placing their feet carefully to avoid the betraying crunch of the stones. The ground floor window was of the simple latch variety, but as Kirk extended exploratory fingers Spock laid a detaining hand on his arm and a tendril of thought coalesced in his mind.

//Alarms.//

The windows at the far end of the building proved to be similarly defended.

"Looks like it'll have to be upstairs," Kirk whispered, moving back to the first window. Bracing his back against the wall he cupped his hands, offering a lift. There was no need to explain further - they had done this before. Spock went to his shoulders like a gymnast. Kirk stood balancing his weight and trying to follow progress by the clicks and tappings from above.

After a few moments a soft whisper drifted down to him. "A little more elevation, if possible, Captain."

He cupped his hands to stirrup Spock's feet and straightened his arms. More clicking followed, and what might have been a quiet Vulcan expletive. His arms began to tremble with the strain. Sweat stung his eyes. Suddenly there was the almost noiseless motion of a hinge, and Spock's weight lifted abruptly from his hands. He half expected Spock to come down and open the lower window, but looking up he saw the Vulcan braced, leaning over the sill and proffering a hand.

"Your turn, Jim," he muttered to himself, and setting one foot on the lower window ledge he sprang to catch at Spock's wrist. The impetus of his jump, combined with the lift, raised him high enough to grasp the upper sill, and a few scrambled moments later he tumbled over it into the room.

As he rose, straightening his jacket, the stray light of Walrus and Carpenter showed him that they had entered not one of the main laboratories but a storeroom. Four dusty filing cabinets were pushed together to form an island in the middle of the floor; some bags of chemicals were stacked against the wall, together with a heap of rope and tarpaulin and several assorted cans of paint.

Spock already had the far door open and was checking the corridor. The stairs at the end led them down to the laboratories and other work rooms. Drifting along the corridor, past doors with labels and name tabs on them, they located one which bore the marks of screw holes and the signs of a tab having recently been removed. Kirk tried the door handle. It was locked.

"This one looks hopeful," he said.

Something slim and metallic in Spock's hand gleamed as he inserted it into the lock. Intrigued, Kirk looked closer.

"An electronic lock-pick? Why Mr. Spock, those things are *most* illegal!"

One eyebrow rose. "Whereas the activity in which we are engaged is one of the utmost probity?"

"First hot-wiring a car, then breaking and entering, and now lock-picking," Kirk murmured. "You know, Mr. Spock, if ever you are finished with Starfleet, I think the Guild of Thieves would be very pleased to meet you."

"Sir, your prerogatives as my Commanding Officer do not extend to insult."

Kirk chuckled softly as the door swung open.

Dr. Endicott's office possessed the same air of dusty disuse as the storerooms above. A desk and chair, a row of filing cabinets and an antiquated computer terminal provided the furnishings. Spock locked the door behind them and Kirk operated the polarising control on the windows before switching on the small desk-top lamp.

Spock settled himself at the computer terminal. Resignedly, Kirk opened the first of the filing cabinets, extracted a handful of documents and began to read.

Any doubts as to the ownership of the room were resolved within the first five minutes. The drawers contained numerous papers bearing Endicott's name. Beyond that, although he was no geologist, it soon became apparent to Kirk that the paperwork consisted largely of a series of rather routine tests and surveys, all with extremely routine results, which merely served to confirm what they already knew. Geologically speaking, Leonardo's Planet was a totally unexceptional world.

Some time later Kirk pushed the last bundle of papers back into the drawer and closed it with an irritable shove. "Nothing at all," he said disgustedly. "How about you, Spock?"

"Nothing at all," the Vulcan echoed, his manner abstracted. "And that is precisely what is so very interesting."

Kirk hooked a chair round and sat astride, arms folded along the back, to peer over his friend's shoulder. Spock tilted the screen slightly to let him see, and touched the keyboard so that data began to scroll slowly across it.

"As far as I can ascertain," he said, "some of Dr. Endicott's work appears to be missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes. Certain cross references do not correspond, and as it stands the results of this analysis, here and here," he pointed, "do not actually make sense."

"Is it possible that he opened another file under a different password for security purposes?"

Spock nodded slowly. "It is possible. However, I would consider it unlikely. Dr. Endicott's concern with security seems at best to have been nominal." So saying Spock tipped the keyboard enough to show the list of passwords neatly taped to its underside.

"Hmm, I see what you mean." Kirk paused for a moment, thinking hard. "Spock, could you run an audit trail on those files, get the computer to list the dates when work was done and amendments made to them?"

The Vulcan nodded again as he grasped the implication and bent over the terminal once more. He worked silently, his long fingers coaxing the keyboard like a recalcitrant child.

Kirk, watching just as intently over his shoulder, suddenly punched the air in triumph. "Jackpot, Spock!"

Displayed on the screen was a list of dates when the Endicott files had been amended, together with the user id. of the individual who had done so.

"There's definitely something fishy going on, Spock. It's either that, or ghosts can work computers, because according to that list those two entries logged under Dr. Endicott's id. were made over a week after he died."

Spock followed his pointing finger and raised a pensive eyebrow. "I fail to see the connection between a cold-blooded aquatic vertebrate and our present problem; however, I would agree that Dr. Endicott's records have been adulterated, and since we may logically exclude supernatural intervention..."

"That brings us back to who and why," Kirk finished jubilantly.

"It is logical to suppose that the two are connected. If we can deduce the one, it may be possible to extrapolate the other."

"Spock, I know how you hate to speculate without concrete information, but from the details that we do have, is there any way you could make an estimate of what is missing?"

The Vulcan folded his arms thoughtfully. His face, underlit by the soft green glow of the computer screen, assumed the look of a studious Satan.

"Under the circumstances I would not hesitate to..." he baulked slightly at the idiomatic phrase, "give you my best guess, but geology is not my specialism, and I have no constructive suggestion to offer. I shall, however, make a duplicate record of this data and consult the - " His head lifted and his hand flew to the power switch. "Someone is coming!"

Kirk glanced around. "Behind the desk - quickly!"

Spock swung round the desk, pausing only to depolarise the windows, and dropped down behind it. Kirk lingered long enough to switch off the desk lamp before vaulting over the desk to join him.

As they crouched in the warm darkness the chirring of the night insects drifted to their ears, overlaid with the staccato rhythm of footsteps approaching along the corridor. A torch beam flickered across the frosted glass pane, then steadied as the bearer came to a halt. Jim felt Spock gather himself in the confined space and tensed himself ready for action as the door opened and light played around the room.

They ducked lower in their cramped hiding place as the beam flared across it and moved on. In the renewed darkness Kirk chanced a look. The figure carrying the torch was no more than a blurred shadow behind the brightness of the beam, a dark outline against the lighter oblong of the open door. There followed a century or two of waiting until the doorlatch once more clicked into place and the footsteps retreated down the corridor. Slowly Kirk rose to his feet, easing cramped muscles, and let his breath out in a soundless whistle.

"As Alice said, 'Curiouser and curiouser.' Who do you suppose that was, Spock? And more importantly, why were they here?"

"I regret I am unable to answer your first question, Captain. As to the second, it is possible that the light showed through the door and they came to investigate."

"In that case, why not simply put on the light?"

"I am at a loss to explain."

"I was afraid you were going to say that. And to think we came hoping to get some answers."

The journey to the aircar passed without incident. Neither of them said much during the return drive, and the ambiguous moonlight showed them the sleeping countryside - but no answers.

CHAPTER VII

The following morning Jim was working on his second cup of coffee and checking with Scotty when Barkley walked in. He continued speaking, but his eyes lit up with amusement as the other man sat down with exaggerated care. As he closed the communicator Barkley lowered his head to his hands with a theatrical groan.

"Must you be so infernally chipper and healthy at this hour of the day? I'm supposed to be the native, hardened to the diabolical liquors that we

serve. Can't you at least have the decency to have a headache?"

"I have a headache," Kirk agreed placatingly, omitting to mention its cause.

"Is he always this enthusiastic?" Barkley continued unabated as McCoy entered, followed by the soft-footed and efficient Khoor.

"Oh no," McCoy replied soothingly, helping himself to rolls and coffee. "Sometimes he's much worse."

Khoor stationed himself by Kirk's chair, politely awaiting a lull in the conversation. "Excuse me, sir. Commander Spock asked me to tell you he is conducting a survey to augment the information he obtained yesterday, should you wish to contact him."

"Oh no, not another one!" Barkley groaned. "I can't take this much enthusiasm so early in the day." And then as the thought hit him, "My god, Jim, whatever he's surveying you'd better tell Spock to keep away from the geology station. Taylor's testy enough at the best of times. He'll go berserk if he thinks his work is being second-guessed by one of your bright boys."

"Fair enough," Kirk acknowledged.

Barkley leaned over to poke McCoy in the ribs. "Come on, Len. Let's start earning our keep and even the score a little. If you've finished I'll introduce you to Colin Furnidge."

"Fine." McCoy rose immediately. "You coming, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head with a smile. "No thanks, Bones. You know me - I'm allergic to hospitals. Since you all believe I work too hard, I'm going to prove you wrong. I think I'll go for a walk."

Korrygane was still low on the horizon as Kirk stepped from the door, the sky an opalescent blue scattered over with buttermilk clouds. This was the ideal time of day for walking or working before the heat of the day set in. Out of sight, though not out of hearing, there came the crash of gears and the rattle of a wheeled truck over cobbles.

The same little group appeared to have gathered by the well, the children squealing and romping like otters in the liquid silver of the overspill. One snatched at his companion's jacket and fled shrieking with excitement, only to trip and plough full length across the stones. His face was starting to pucker with shock and the pain of skinned knees by the time Kirk reached him. The other children gathered round as, stooping, Jim set him on his feet. The victim's eyes widened as he took in the details of Kirk's uniform.

"Say, are you in Starfleet, Mister?" he asked with something akin to awe.

"Don't you know nuthin?" another voice put in, filled with the scorn of seniority. "He's Captain Kirk of the Enterprise."

"G'wan!" came the reply, and then with less certainty, "Are you really, sir?"

"'Fraid so."

"Go-osh!"

"Paolo, come here at once!" The woman's voice cut across the opening barrage of questions. Detaching herself from the small crowd she hurried over.

"I'm sorry if he's been bothering you, Captain," she said curtly, pulling the boy away and forestalling Kirk's disclaimer. Without further comment she returned to her watching friends. The little group of women closed ranks, drawing their children with them, and left the square.

Jim watched them go thoughtfully. Any tentative ideas he may have had about allaying public suspicion sank without trace. Whatever the children's feelings might be on the subject, it was fairly obvious that their parents wanted nothing whatsoever to do with Starfleet.

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Senior Geological Technician Fisher closed up the back of the tricorder and made another 180 degree sweep. It was still there, that slight falling off of the curve at the end of the arc, as though the instrument had lost power. He tried again, making the suspect point the centre of his next sweep. This time the fluctuation was infinitesimal, but it still persisted. He straightened and looked out across the countryside, pushing sweat-damp hair from his forehead with the heel of his hand as he did so.

The heat was building again. He could feel the sweat pool in the hollows of his throat and across his back. The distant mountains wavered uncertainly, as though caught in shifting dimensions. The taka trees that Fisher, Earth-born, still mentally designated poplars stood tall and black like straight brush strokes against a landscape leached of colour by the sunlight. Nothing stirred in all that vast expanse between himself and the shimmering mountains, save for the hoppers hidden deep in the dry grasses, whose strident monotone ran like the warp thread through the heavy fabric of the heat.

Another monotonous and less melodic sound permeated the quiet. Peters, the young security man assigned to him, had succumbed to the heat and now slumbered peacefully in the shadow of a stunted bush. Fisher looked down again at the tricorder in his hands. The simplest option would be to set the variation down to instrument malfunction, forget the whole thing and beam back to the Enterprise before his brain fried in his skull.

Time, however, cures most things, particularly youth. Fisher was no longer the brash young man who in taking a fall from a rocky outcrop and beaming aboard with yellow ore spattering his clothing had nearly destroyed his Captain. He had matured into a competent geologist and one of the most trusted of Spock's scientific team. One lesson he had learned from his senior officer was the value of paying attention to small details. With a last wistful glance at the droning Peters he unshipped his communicator.

Spock arrived sooner than seemed possible in response to the call, striding uphill through the long grass and scrub, urbane and uncrumpled as though attending an Admiralty inspection at the end of a full month's R&R. Fisher abruptly became aware of his own creased uniform and flagging enthusiasm. Peters, rudely awakened and desperately trying to look more intelligent than he felt, muttered from the corner of his mouth.

"I'll bet he's got a special arrangement with the dust. He just gives it one of *those* looks and it lands someplace else."

Spock, however, was less concerned with sartorial standards than with the aberrant behaviour of the tricorder. He repeated Fisher's tests and frowning slightly compared them with the results shown by his own equipment. The readings were identical in every respect.

"It is interesting to note, Mr. Fisher, that these readings also correspond precisely to those produced by the free-standing tricorder. We may therefore eliminate mechanical failure from our enquiry," he said.

The chirrup of his communicator prevented further discussion.

"How's the survey going, Mr. Spock?" the Captain's voice, rendered tinny by distance, enquired.

"We are progressing steadily, Captain, but until the data are collated and evaluated I regret I have no precise information available," Spock replied.

"Keep me posted. I'm returning to the ship to relieve Scotty. He'll be chewing the furniture with frustration by now at the thought of spending all this time laid over and not being able to get down into Engineering. Oh, by the way, Jerom reckons that Dr. Taylor is liable to get upset, 'Go berserk' was the actual phrase he used, if he catches you trespassing on 'his' territory, so if you need to do any surveying up around the geology base, be discreet."

"Very well, Captain. Spock out."

"Do you suppose those readings could be caused by some kind of unusual ore reflecting the signal?" Fisher ventured when his senior officer had concluded his call.

The Vulcan raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Speculation was ever an inexact science, Mr. Fisher. In the absence of further information, the list of possibilities is almost infinite. I would suggest that we do as the Captain recommended and return to our work - with discretion, and a little nearer to the geologists' base. Regrettably Mohammed must go to the mountain," the dry voice continued. "My influence over the disposition of the physical features of this planet extends only to the dust."

Security man Peters had the grace to blush.

* * * * *

The midday sun batted on the landscape, drawing colour and life from buildings and foliage, leaving them dusty and spent. It threw long cool tabby stripes from the blinds across the room where McCoy was working, against which the monitor screen glowed like a jewel.

Hip hitched comfortably on the window ledge, arms folded across his chest, the doctor sat quietly absorbing the joy and wonder on the face of the woman presently lost in contemplation of the minor miracle depicted on the screen before her. He had a busy schedule mapped out for him and a lot of patients still to see, but at that precise moment McCoy was in no hurry at all. One of the small perks of the profession he called it, and he had every intention of enjoying it to the full.

Echoes of that joy still lingered on the woman's face when finally she raised her eyes to his. He smiled at her in gentle understanding.

"As you can see, Mrs. Orsini, there's nothing to worry about. Your pregnancy's proceeding quite normally, and the little fella's doing just fine." He extended a hand to help her down from the couch. "Only one thing I'd suggest. Didn't I see you drawing water at the well yesterday? Might be a good thing to let your husband do that, just for the last few weeks until after the baby's born."

Joy went out like a light extinguished, to be replaced by an almost Vulcan impassivity. "Thank you, Doctor, but I'm afraid that will not be possible."

"But I thought you said..."

"My husband is away at present. We have some land up towards the mountains. He is working there."

"Surely he would come back just for a short while? After all, it'd give him the chance to see his son come into the world."

"He cannot be spared," she answered shortly. "And now, Doctor, if you have no further need of me, may I go now?"

He nodded automatically and she withdrew. Alone in the shadowed room McCoy stood gazing thoughtfully at the door long after it had closed behind her.

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Kirk was met in the transporter room by a delighted Chief Engineer. "It's good to have you back, sir. It's been as quiet as the grave."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. Let's hope it stays that way. Sorry to have held up the maintenance schedule," he added with hint of irony.

It passed unnoticed. "Och, no trouble, sir. The lads hae done a fine job, but I will admit that there's one or two wee things that I'd like to attend to my ain self, so if you'll excuse me, sir..." He headed for the door with a purposeful stride.

"Don't get carried away, Scotty," Kirk addressed the rapidly retreating back. "There's something about all this that still doesn't feel right. We may have to do the unexpected rapidly, and that's always a little difficult if the warp engines are stripped down to their component atoms."

With only Sulu and Uhura remaining from the A shift the bridge seemed unnaturally quiet. Kirk exchanged smiles with Uhura and signed to Sulu to retain the con despite his presence. They did not require his help to watch the stately turn of the planet beneath them, matched by the graceful movement of the Enterprise in synchronous orbit above. He halted by the elevator door.

"As I seem to remember saying once before, I'm going to my quarters to tackle some paperwork before it spills out from under the door and comes looking for me. My desk looked bad enough before; I dread to think what's landed on it since."

Uhura smiled sympathetically. "It's probably got a Phd by now."

He looked at her blankly. "A Phd?"

She nodded with only a trace of imp in her eyes. "Mm hm - piled higher and deeper!" she said.

He was still grinning over that one when he finally confronted the avalanche. Yeoman Rand had performed her customary miracle of rationalisation, but even after such a ruthless sorting and sifting the fact remained that in order to keep a Starship running an awful lot of paper has to cross its Captain's desk; and although its crew might be engaged in seeking out new life and new civilisations with all their new attendant problems, all the *old* attendant problems still remain to be solved.

Reluctantly Kirk picked up the first sheet of paper. Damn, that was a shame. In his hand he held an application for transfer to planet-based duties in view of his father's failing health, signed by Ensign Roberts, a bright and promising youngster from Life Sciences.

Two months ago Roberts had requested an interview with Kirk on this very subject. The young man had been diffident and embarrassed, the lilting sibilance of his Welsh origins clear in his speech.

"It's not that I want to leave the Enterprise, sir. Far from it. I love

space and Starfleet service, and I'll never get another posting as good as this as long as I live. It's just that, well, Da took good care of me right from when Mam left us; now it's his turn to need me, and each of us is all the family the other's got." He had fallen uneasily silent, the plea for understanding hanging unspoken between them.

Kirk had advised him to consider carefully before making a final decision, contacted Starfleet Personnel and Welfare and hoped that the situation would resolve itself. In a sense it had, but not in a way that gave him any satisfaction. Under the circumstances he would not dream of putting obstacles in Roberts' way, but it still seemed like a tragic waste of a good crewman. The boy had abundant curiosity and a joy in exploring the new and unfamiliar, untainted by prejudice - the kind of talents invaluable in space exploration, and largely unregarded by the majority of planet-bound institutions that Kirk had encountered.

In the right environment Roberts' abilities could perhaps be developed in a way that would stand him in good stead if ever he wished to return to space. This, Kirk decided, was one for Spock. The Vulcan had contacts in Science Branch scattered throughout the galaxy. If anyone could suggest a posting where an open-minded and unbiased approach would be encouraged, he could. Carefully Jim laid the paper aside and investigated further.

If young Roberts' transfer application might be considered to be Spock's problem, the discouragingly bulky report lying beneath it was undeniably his. The time of year was fast approaching when Starfleet would draw up its plans and finalise its annual budgets. Consequently Kirk had asked his department heads for an outline of proposed research, together with projected costs, bearing in mind Starfleet's budgetary restrictions - never a popular manoeuvre. It being the contention of all department heads that the funding was invariably inadequate, they presented him with a variety of cogent and well-reasoned arguments as to why they should be allowed to exceed it. Before him, neatly bound, lay Dr. Bryant's argument.

Dr. Bryant was head of Life Sciences, and Ensign Roberts' superior officer. Plainly the enthusiasm of the acolyte reflected that of the master, for Dr. Bryant was undoubtedly an enthusiast. His enthusiasm for the job overflowed into his enthusiasm for paperwork. Given the opportunity to exercise one enthusiasm in defence of the other, he had waxed expansive to the tune of 139 pages and 4 appendices. Kirk contemplated it without enthusiasm.

As he opened the first page, Kirk's lips suddenly twitched as memory supplied the recollection of Dr. McCoy placing a similar, but considerably slimmer, document on his desk a week ago.

"'Fraid that's all there is of it, Jim. If Starfleet can't work out for themselves that it's in their own interest to keep highly trained and expensive personnel alive and give us the money to do it, all my telling 'em won't make any difference, so I've kept it short. Guess medicine and report writing have that much in common - don't reckon a man's entitled to more than one appendix in either!"

Jim surfaced again to the sound of the door chime and the chronometer showing 18.00 hours planet time. Janice Rand entered with a loaded tray, from which permeated the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Kirk's spirits lifted. She swept a space clear on the desk with practised ease and unloaded her tray.

"A little anti-soporific for you, sir, and Mr. Spock's compliments. He says he will be finished at 18.30 hours Leonardo's time, and asks whether you will be free to join him."

Spock was waiting for him when he materialised on the piazza once more, a tall uncompromising figure standing stiffly erect against a background of sunshine and flowers. Kirk felt a sudden irrational rush of affection for his friend, and smiled at him.

"You don't look like you've had a good day either. Come on, let's find Bones and then we can compare notes."

The Vulcan fell into step with him and together they strolled companionably down the cobbled street towards the hospital. For all that Leonardo's Planet was a newly colonised world with room for all its inhabitants to build as spaciouly as they wished, here the buildings clustered together so closely that it was dusk in the narrow street, while the rooftops were still in full daylight and the sky above was blue and clear.

Shutters were going up over shop doors and windows, their owners making their way homewards. One or two nodded a greeting to the two Enterprise men, but none stopped to talk. Spock, too, was quiet and withdrawn.

Something's bothering him, Kirk thought, glancing sideways at the impassive, shuttered face. Direct questions never worked too well with Spock when he was troubled. Kirk began with an oblique approach.

"How's the survey going?"

"Satisfactorily, thank you, Captain. I have sent Mr. Fisher back to the ship to correlate our findings. I will check them with him later."

"I suppose it would be too much to hope that you've found anything to cast a light on our mystery?"

Spock looked up to where the lingering sunlight made spun-gold filigree of a bird cage hung below an upstairs window and turned the terracotta roofing tiles to flame. To a casual observer it might have seemed that the Vulcan had simply been distracted for a moment, but Kirk had been Spock-watching for too many years now to be deceived; he waited, and eventually Spock sighed resignedly and continued.

"There is a slight anomaly in some of the tricorder readings. So far I have been unable to ascertain the reason for this, and I am uncertain of its significance. It does not appear to offer any kind of threat, however, nor does it conform to any recognisable pattern. It is not logical."

"But you have a hunch?" Kirk prompted gently.

"Vulcans do not have hunches," Spock responded automatically, but clearly his heart was not in it.

"Well you mightn't, but I have," Kirk said with feeling. "Let's see what Bones has to tell us."

McCoy looked up from rinsing his hands as they entered. "Hi, Jim, Spock. I've just about finished up here for today. Christine and I have worked our butts off checking and testing everyone and everything. I'm not saying that we're not doing useful work here, but would you mind telling an old country doctor, Captain sir, precisely what it's all in aid of?"

Kirk grinned. "Why, the health and wellbeing of the colonists, what else?" Then, more seriously, "There's something odd about all of this that I can't put my finger on. It's an itch I can't scratch, and it worries me."

"Well then, here's something else for your 'Funny Peculiar' file," McCoy said, beginning to clear his desk. "Where are all the men?" He picked up a

handful of tapes and began stacking them carefully into cabinet drawers. "Without exception, all the people I treated here today were women and children. So I asked them where their husbands were. I got some very odd looks, I can tell you. They told me the men are away, working up in the hills. All right, some of them I can believe, but all of them? It's not natural."

"You are proceeding from a subjective assessment based upon your personal definition of the term 'natural', Doctor," Spock said. "The men of some Indian tribes of North America frequently went on prolonged hunting expeditions following the buffalo herds, leaving the women and children in the villages. The hill people of..."

McCoy shut the drawer with a snap. "Listen, Spock, skip the social anthropology lesson. This is the 23rd century, and as you would undoubtedly be the first to tell me, the buffalo is not indigenous to Leonardo's Planet. If you want my opinion, there's something wrong. Some of those women seem scared. So scared, in fact, that some of them were trying to avoid free medical help that they badly need, and in my book that's not natural."

Spock raised a sceptical eyebrow. "I, on the other hand, find it entirely comprehensible, Doctor."

McCoy's expression would have shrivelled steel.

Kirk held up a restraining hand. "Is this a private fight, or can anyone join in?"

McCoy subsided. "Sorry, Jim, but it does seem a little strange to me."

"For what it's worth, I agree with you, Bones; but as Spock says, there may be a perfectly valid reason. Spock, would you care to venture any further opinion?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "There is insufficient data, Captain, to enable me to reach a valid conclusion. It is merely a further anomalous fact to be included in my analysis."

"I think that translates as he doesn't know," McCoy grunted.

Kirk impaled them both with a look. "In that case, gentlemen, perhaps it is something we should raise with Jerom Barkley."

"Well that shouldn't be a problem, at any rate," McCoy said. "He's invited us to dinner this evening."

* * * * *

Kirk closed the collar of his dress uniform, twitched the tunic firmly into place and headed for the door. On the landing a narrow band of light gleamed beneath McCoy's door. Spock's room was in darkness, but a steady murmur of voices rose from the study below. Distance rendered the words unintelligible, but Kirk could unerringly recognise the precision of Spock's speech pattern underlying the uneven rhythm of Barkley's words. Disparate personalities though they were, the two had plainly found a topic of mutual interest. Smiling, he hurried down the stairs.

Two men were waiting in the shadowed hall, with the patience of those trained to remain alert in the face of inactivity. Somewhat surprised, Kirk recognised them as the two Security men from the landing party, Feracci and Peters. Feracci stepped forward.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir, but we were wondering whether you're likely to need us again this evening?"

Kirk was drawing breath to say that he had thought that Spock had sent them back to the ship with Fisher when Koor, velvet-footed and discreet as ever, materialised at his elbow.

"I must apologise, Captain. If there is any confusion the fault is entirely mine. I assumed that since these gentlemen are part of your crew, it would be best if they were provided with a meal and accommodation here. I have done the former, and was on my way to arrange the latter, but if you would prefer some alternative arrangement...?"

Over his shoulder Kirk caught sight of the two Security men unsuccessfully feigning indifference. They were young and inexperienced; planetside duties normally fell to the longer-serving members of the security team. Spock had suggested that they would benefit from landing party duty here, and Kirk had agreed. Besides, Jim remembered all too clearly his own sense of eagerness for new experience. Earth-like it might be, but Leonardo's Planet was nonetheless another world not their own, and any time spent there, however short, would serve to broaden their horizons just a little. Therefore he smiled at the Klingon and shook his head.

"No, if you're sure it won't cause too much disruption that would be fine, thank you."

The two guards exchanged glances as Koor faded soundlessly away, then sprang to a spine-stretching military brace and saluted. Kirk smothered a smile and fixed them with a meaningful look.

"Yes, well curb your enthusiasm a little, gentlemen. I expect you to behave responsibly and to keep your communicators with you. Dismiss." He was still smiling when he went in to dinner.

* * * * *

Spock and Barkley were seated in wing-back chairs at either end of an oriental rug, comfortably like bookends. Conversation had lapsed when Kirk entered, but the silence between them was companionable. Jim took one end of the long sofa between the chairs and accepted proffered brandy. Barkley resumed his seat and raised his glass slightly in Kirk's direction.

"Cheers, Jim. May you never be short of a star to steer by."

Kirk lifted his glass in reply. "Thanks, Jerom. Long life and happiness to you too. Oh, and by the way, thanks also for providing a bed for Peters and Feracci. I hadn't really intended you to be landed with billeting the troops."

The limpid, toffee-brown gaze pinned him suddenly. "I didn't know I had. Koor arranged it, I presume." He spread his hands in an expansive, whimsical gesture and suddenly the laughter was back in his voice. "Not that it matters a jot. 'Mi casa, su casa' as they say. My house is yours. Oh, there you are, Len." This last was addressed to McCoy who was standing in the doorway wearing his dress uniform and a scowl. "I'm not going to waste good Saurian brandy on your tastebuds, but I've got a twenty year old single malt scotch that I'd prescribe for a jaded palate any day."

McCoy came to join Kirk on the sofa and the moment was lost as the patterns of friendship broke and reformed.

In spite of dress uniforms dinner was not a restrained social occasion. Barkley 'off duty' was a genial and entertaining host with a wide range of interests and a fund of witty anecdotes, so that they ate and talked and laughed until, for the first time in far too long, Kirk forgot for a while his responsibilities, and even Spock relaxed a little as food and wine and conversation wove golden threads to catch them in a net of warmth and

friendship.

Eventually the pace of conversation slowed a little. Barkley leaned back in his chair, twisting the stem of his glass between his fingers to watch the bubbles rise. "And how was your day, Len?" he asked.

"To borrow a phrase," McCoy replied, "fascinating. Everything from babies to bunions, and one poor soul who told me she suffers terribly with her 'Very close veins'." He let the laughter subside. "Actually, it's probably quite a privilege. I don't suppose many doctors get to see a case of varicose veins these days. By the way, Jerom, what have you done with all your menfolk? Shipped them off to Khlinzai to dig trillium?"

Kirk, seated close, saw the pupils of the chestnut eyes expand and contract with shock. In the long silence Barkley drew a sharp breath like a man who has been struck, and let it go again on a shaky laugh.

"Don't even joke about it, Len. We're close enough to the Klingon border for that not to be funny." He made a visible effort to control himself and cut through the awkwardness with a genuine smile. "I'm sorry. You weren't to know. Talk about over-reacting! In answer to your question, they're most of 'em working up in the hills. They'll be back in plenty of time for the harvest. But you needn't worry - they're independent as hell and as strong as horses. You haven't missed many patients there."

McCoy nodded, still more than a little discomfited by the unexpected reaction, and the conversation passed on. But though they sat and talked until late the mood was spoiled and the spontaneity gone.

CHAPTER VIII

Kirk was dreaming. The faceless figure turned away, refusing to answer the question he couldn't remember asking but somehow knew was vital. "You already know. You already know," it chanted tonelessly, and began to chirrup like a communicator.

The chirruping continued as the dream faded and resolved itself into his communicator calling insistently from the bedside table. His groping hand connected with cold metal and he managed to say, "Kirk here," with a crispness he was very far from feeling.

Sleep was abruptly banished as McCoy's voice said, "You'd better get down here, Jim. I think we may have a problem."

Downstairs he was met by an unusually sombre McCoy and a white-faced Ensign Peters.

"Young Ferracci's gone missing," McCoy began without preamble.

Kirk rounded on the young security guard. "When was this?"

"Last night, sir."

"I realise that, Mr. Peters. But when precisely last night?"

Peters' face was a battleground of anxiety and resolve, but he drew himself up with military precision to face his responsibilities and the wrath of his commanding officer. "I don't know, sir. I was asleep."

Kirk felt anger knot in the pit of his stomach and repressed it savagely. The lad was nervous and ashamed, and yelling wouldn't help. Instead he dropped into a chair and motioned for the other two to do the same. "All right," he

said, "I think you'd better start from the beginning."

Peters drew a long, steadying breath. "There's not much to tell, really, sir. After we left you we went back to the room. We talked for a while and then started getting ready for bed. I was really tired, but Tad - Ensign Ferracci - said that he wasn't sleepy. He wanted to go outside for a while, just to look at the stars or something, and he told me not to wait up for him."

"And you let him go?"

Silently the youngster nodded.

"One of the cardinal rules when on a hostile planet..." Kirk stopped himself. They were not on a hostile planet. Officially Leonardo's Planet was a Federation colony, and an itch between the Captain's shoulderblades did not in any way alter its official status. On a hostile planet there would have been no question. They would have obeyed the rule which said that security teams must always work in pairs, one keeping watch while the other slept, but Leonardo's Planet had sung its siren song of innocence, and they had succumbed.

"Didn't you even notice that you should have changed watch?" Kirk demanded.

The reply came tight with strain. "I slept right through, sir. I didn't even realise that he was missing till this morning."

"Okay," Kirk said. "I want an honest answer to this question. Do you think he might have jumped ship?"

The ingenious eyes widened a little with shock, but continued to meet his steadily. "No, I don't think so, sir. We were friends. We talked. Sure, he was crazy about this place, said that it reminded him of home, but he had plans, ambitions. I don't believe one evening would have changed all that."

"Fair enough. If we're going to mount a search I don't want to waste time searching rivers and dragging lakes for a boy who's simply had a bellyfull of Starfleet discipline and doesn't want to be found. I think we may conclude that something or someone has detained Mr. Ferracci, probably against his will." Kirk looked at the young security man sitting mute and miserable before him, and sighed.

"It's a hard way to learn the lesson, Mr. Peters, but anywhere other than on the ship, even when you're off duty you're not. Whatever your surroundings may look like, stay alert. It's not just the first rule of a good security guard, it's the first rule of survival. Now get on to Ms. Flynn, ask her to institute a full-scale search and let's hope that all Mr. Ferracci encountered was a pretty girl who led him astray."

Peters rose to go.

"Oh, and Mr. Peters," Kirk called softly to his departing back, "don't take it too hard. Inexperience is not an excuse, but it is a reason - once."

Peters did not turn, but Kirk was rewarded by the straightening of his shoulders as he left the room.

Kirk watched the door close and sighed again. "Goddamit, Bones, that's all we need. Another homesick kid with stars in his eyes and no common sense." He dragged a hand wearily across his face to dispel the clinging remains of sleep. "Anyway, how come you're up at this hour? Don't tell me you couldn't sleep. Did Peters wake you?"

McCoy nodded.

"And I suppose you thought you'd stick around in case I chewed his ears off. I didn't realise you saw me as a martinet." His words had an edge to them which belied the lightness of his tone.

McCoy's reply was soothing. "Not at all, Jim, but it *is* first thing in the morning, and you haven't had a cup of coffee yet."

In spite of himself Kirk was forced to smile, and went out into the dawn.

* * * * *

The quiet of the piazza was transformed. The children were still there, but silent now and watchful, as glowing columns of light coalesced to form groups of Enterprise crewpeople to swell the numbers already assembled. Mr. Peters had wasted no time.

In a search of this nature expertise was of less importance than sheer weight of numbers, so that Science blue and Command gold mingled with the red of Security. Scanning the crowd, Kirk's eye fell on the red uniform and distinctive copper hair of Mandala Flynn, his Chief of Security, who was standing talking to Spock. He worked his way through the press to join them.

Using a stone bench for a desk, Security Chief and Science Officer had an enlargement of one of the Enterprise's aerial surveys of the town spread out between them and were allocating areas to the search parties. Peering over their shoulders Kirk nodded approvingly.

"You've made good time."

Flynn flashed him a quick answering smile. "We aim to please, sir."

"You too, Spock. I was expecting to have to round up your people from the survey and bring them back."

"I cannot claim any credit for that, Captain. It was perhaps fortuitous that Mr. Fisher's analysis of some of the initial findings was somewhat delayed, so that I was available to assist Ms. Flynn, leaving Mr. al Auriga free to begin the search. However, since you are here I will, with your permission, accompany Mr. Lesley's group who are short-handed, and begin a search of the river area."

Kirk watched the search parties disperse with a feeling of resignation. Ship's sensors were useless for tracking one particular Human being on a planet full of Human colonists. Peters wasn't the only one who wasn't thinking properly, Kirk reflected bitterly; otherwise, Federation territory or not, he would have ordered all members of the landing party to be equipped with subcutaneous transponders and the problem would never have arisen at all. As it was it was fairly easy to establish that Ferracci had not gone visiting, not stayed the night in someone's home. After that they were reduced to searching manually all the places where a badly injured or unconscious man might be lying. And those were legion.

The search continued as the sun rose, and Kirk became aware of the all too familiar anxiety clenching his stomach. One of his people was in trouble and there seemed to be so little he could do about it. He allocated himself to one of the search parties and moved out with them along a narrow street where the houses turned blind shuttered backs to the road. The air smelled of heat and garbage and more dubious odours. He watched the men fan out, searching through piles of abandoned crates and an old rusting car and peering over walls into the gardens beyond.

Across the road a patch of wasteland straggled with weeds and crumbling walls, knee high. A perfect place to hide or, he amended grimly, be hidden. A few flowers forced their way amongst the debris, the brilliance of their colours

deadened by a fine layer of summer dust that rose, drifting dry and powdery against his lips as he moved, and clinging whitely to his uniform pants. His foot turned against a brick set cornerwise in the hard-baked earth.

The scream reached him, thin as a bird's cry and as wild, and continued, a high gasping rhythm that rasped the nerves. Kirk was running before the bleep of his communicator sounded, and he did not pause to answer.

As he skidded into the piazza he heard the percussive impact of a hand on flesh, and the screaming stopped. From the tail of his eye he caught a glimpse of Jerom Barkley dodging through the crowd towards him. Other people were running, converging on the square. Instinct compelled Kirk to elbow his way through them towards the little group gathered by the well, but in his heart he already knew what he would find.

Death diminishes a man. The extinguishing of the spark of life reduces a vital, living being to a pathetic, randomly assembled bundle of sticks and rags, its nature divorced completely from the silently watching crowd and grieving companions around it. As Kirk approached McCoy lowered the corner of the blanket over the shape beneath it and shook his head.

"He was caught in the well rope, that's how she found him." he jerked his head in the direction of the still hysterically weeping woman. "Nothing I can do, Jim. I'd estimate he's been in the water for about twelve hours."

Kirk nodded acknowledgement and turned away. Barkley came up beside him, breathless and stricken.

"Jim, I'm so sorry," he said, his eyes on the blanket-wrapped form. "Len was right, we should have fenced that well. We're all so used to it that it never even crossed my mind that a stranger could blunder into it so easily and drown."

Kirk shook his head and managed to say, "It's not really your fault."

As he spoke Kirk became aware that Spock had left his side and was speaking to McCoy. Eyeing the polite battle-stance of his First Officer and CMO, Kirk made his excuses and joined them.

"Spock, we've just fished that poor lad out of a well. How the hell else do you think he died?"

"Nevertheless, Doctor, under the circumstances I believe a full autopsy would be advisable."

McCoy glanced at Kirk, seeking support, but was denied.

"Spock has a point, Bones. There are so many damned mysteries here at the moment, I'd rather not add to them. Do an autopsy and let me know the result as soon as you can."

McCoy and the stretcher party beamed back to the Enterprise to begin work immediately. Spock reassembled the survey team and also beamed up in order to then be transported down to resume the interrupted survey. Subdued by the tragedy, the rest of the crew waited quietly to return, as they had come, in small groups, to the ship. In the absence of any more definite idea of how to proceed, Kirk went with them, and a mood of leaden waiting settled over the ship.

* * * * *

Kirk sat in his cabin trying to compose a letter to Ferracci's family, but his mind refused to grapple with the words. How do you tell parents that their

son had died, not in the heat and glory of action but as the result of a stupid, needless accident, without even the call of duty to give his death purpose? The commpad still lay blank before him when the intercom buzzed and McCoy's voice said,

"I've got those results for you, Jim, if you've got five minutes to pop down to Sickbay."

"Might as well for all the good I'm doing here." He flicked the toggle to off and made for the door.

McCoy looked drawn and faintly troubled. He wagged a computer tape at Kirk as he entered the office. "There's your autopsy report."

"And?" Kirk prompted.

"I hate to admit it, but that pointy-eared hobgoblin was right - or at least partly so. Oh, the poor devil died of drowning all right, there's no doubt of that - lungs full of water. Trouble is, I'm not a criminal pathologist, but there is something I'm not happy about. There was an area of severe bruising on the back of his head. At first I thought he'd hit it in the fall and knocked himself out - that's why he drowned - but now I'm not so sure. He'd have to have been quite athletic to get a bruise there. If he'd tripped on the coping of the well and fallen forward, then I'd have expected bruising around the face or jaw, not there; and if he'd just stepped forward, straight into the well in the dark, the chances are he wouldn't have hit his head at all on the way down.

"I wouldn't want to go into a court of law with this, Jim, but if you want my opinion, I think there's a better than fair chance that young Taddeo Ferracci was hit over the back of the head by somebody who then pushed him into the well and made sure he drowned."

Kirk tried to feel surprised, but somehow he couldn't manage it. McCoy's conclusion was merely another link in the present chain of events, another mystery without a solution. "Thanks, Bones," he said.

"You're more than welcome. But if it was murder, what are you going to do now?"

Kirk made a small helpless gesture, pacing the narrow confines of McCoy's office restlessly. "To coin a phrase, Bones, I'm a Starship Captain, not a policeman. Somebody in this colony has murdered one of my men, apparently without a motive. It could be any one of a thousand people. I suppose it could even be Peters, although I doubt it. I just don't have the expertise to know where to start looking. As far as I can see, the only thing we can do is wait and see whether the murderer does anything else which might betray him. Which means that Spock goes back to surveying, you carry on seeing patients and the rest of us hurry up and wait."

Whatever hazards might lie in the future, the rest of the day passed uneventfully, and that night Kirk went to bed feeling like a man trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle blindfolded, knowing the feel of the individual pieces by heart, but lacking the overall viewpoint that would let him fit them all together.

CHAPTER IX

The footsteps in the corridor outside his door would not have disturbed a Human. Spock rolled over to listen more intently. It was the combination of stealth and confidence which had singled them out from the other vague nighttime sounds passed over by his subconscious mind and had ultimately wakened him,

suggesting as they did the movements of someone familiar with the layout of the house yet reluctant to draw any attention to themselves. Silently he rose from the bed and reached for his clothes.

As he dressed he considered whether to waken Kirk, then dismissed the idea. For one of the very few occasions in his life Spock of Vulcan was playing a hunch, and there seemed little point in depriving anyone other than himself of sleep for what might be no more than a false alarm.

By the time he opened the door his quarry was already out of sight. The wide staircase led him down to the hall in time to see the study door close, leaving only a wedge of light spilling out across the floor from beneath it, and a low murmur of voices beyond.

The hallway, with its elegant echoing marble floor, offered no safe place of concealment from which to overhear the conversation. Suppressing a flicker of irritation, Spock assessed the alternatives. The main door to the garden was electronically locked, but the locksmith had never envisaged a man of Spock's talents. A few moments later he eased the door open and blended into the darkness outside, where he paused to listen.

Over to his right the unshuttered window blazed like a beacon. Unbelievably it was open, the curtain swaying slightly in the night air. Voices reached him where he stood, one guttural and domineering, the other an indecipherable counterpoint. Silent as mist rising Spock drifted forward, using the soft earth of the flowerbeds to muffle his footsteps, until he crouched against the cool plaster below the sill and eased himself up a little to scan the room.

The man within paced the length of the room restlessly and turned. The glow of the shaded lamp caught and flared on the metallic cloth of his uniform and emphasised the heavy lines of the face and the bifurcated eyebrows - Klingon. He was speaking.

"I do believe you're more squeamish over that Federation guard than over your own people. For what it's worth there was no choice - he saw us. But I tell you this is ridiculous. The longer this situation continues, the greater the chance of discovery. Get rid of them!"

The person so addressed was seated at the desk, all but one hand and the lower legs obscured by the high back of the chair. Cautiously Spock craned a little further, straining to see the face. The soft earth which had silenced his own approach gave him no warning. A twig snapped close by his head. He spun defensively, and the blow intended for the back of his head struck his temple instead. The world exploded into a thousand light-shot fragments and he whirled down into darkness.

"Lord Kereth," the young Klingon officer called softly before leaning in through the window - his superior officer was known to have a nervous trigger finger. "Sir, this scum," he kicked at the inert body lying at his feet, "was spying on you. Shall I kill him?"

Kereth's companion came to the window and gazed down appalled at the huddled figure half obscured by foliage. "My god, it's the Vulcan. How much do you suppose he heard?"

"Peace, fool." Kereth's impatient gesture silenced all further questions. "He cannot use what he has learned. In fact we will teach him even more about our mind control project. Tie him and put him in the aircar, Korth. I shall see that he is suitably dealt with. The whole Klingon Empire has a score to settle with him."

In the darkness of his room Kirk jerked suddenly awake, fighting to recall

the image that had startled him to wakefulness; but in the vague manner of dreams it eluded him so that he lay disturbed and baffled, listening to the silence until eventually he drifted into sleep once more.

* * * * *

Kirk slept badly, tossing between wakefulness and restless dreams, with the result that he overslept and woke to find sunlight splashed in bright pools across his bed. Downstairs he found Barkley and McCoy deep in conversation and coffee, but no sign of Spock.

"Morning, Jerom," he greeted the other man with a nod. "Bones, have you seen Spock this morning?"

"No, but he's probably out working the tails off his survey party. You should know him well enough by now; he hates mysteries - they're illogical."

"Yes, but he normally checks in with me first."

"Maybe he didn't want to wake you." McCoy looked pointedly at the full daylight outside the window.

Kirk grinned acknowledgement of his lapse and reached for his communicator. "Kirk to Spock. Kirk to Spock."

The communicator remained obstinately silent. Some remnant of the shapeless and unnamed fears that had haunted his dreams brought him to his feet. "I'll just check his room. He may have overslept too, and I can't have my First Officer getting fat and lazy in his old age."

Upstairs, Kirk knocked and entered. The room was empty, the bed unmade. His nebulous feelings of unease began to coalesce into real concern. Neat as a pin and fastidious as a cat, nothing short of a red alert would induce Spock to leave a room untidy. Kirk unhitched his communicator once more.

"Kirk to Spock. Kirk to Spock. Come in please, Mr. Spock."

Only the hiss of static answered him. He called again, with the same result, before changing channels. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise." Uhura's voice sounded reassuringly efficient.

"Uhura, I've been trying to reach Mr. Spock, but he doesn't answer. I don't know whether he's on board or planetside. Will you try and reach him, please, and ask Mr. Scott to stand by."

"Aye aye, sir."

Standing in the sun-barred room, where gilded dust motes danced like fireflies, Kirk felt his anxiety mounting as the silent minutes stretched. The bleep of the communicator sounded loud enough to make him jump. The voice at the other end, though, was not entirely unexpected.

"Scott here, sir. Lt. Uhura has been unable to contact Mr. Spock so far, but she's still trying."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. In that case, I'd like you to begin sensor scans to trace him; and ask Ms. Flynn to report to me."

Downstairs in the low-beamed morning cool dining room two pairs of eyes surveyed him with varying degrees of interest and concern. Unusually, McCoy said nothing whilst Kirk issued his orders, and remained silent until the ringing shimmer of the transporter beam outside proclaimed the departure of the

Security Chief with instructions to prepare for a Class One search. His mist-blue gaze scanned Kirk's face anxiously before he said,

"I know you're worried, Jim, but don't you think you're over-reacting just a tad? The fact that Spock didn't answer his communicator doesn't necessarily mean that he's missing. He could have lost it, dropped it, or even got so wrapped up in what he's doing that he just plain didn't hear it. You know he's just as likely to stroll in here an hour from now, not a hair out of place, raise that damned eyebrow of his and say something ungrateful about the waste of crew time and effort, and the effect of such disruption on vital work."

Kirk bit back the urge to tell McCoy to use his brain for once before opening his mouth, conscious that the doctor was talking in order to fend off his own growing anxiety, and instead said mildly, "Maybe I am using a sledge-hammer to crack a nut, but in view of what happened to Ferracci I'd rather be sure."

"Are you trying to tell me you think Spock has been killed?"

"It had crossed my mind."

"But *Spock*?"

"Is no more indestructible than the rest of us," Kirk snapped, finally exasperated.

McCoy fell silent, considering. Eventually he said softly, "Dollars to doughnuts he's still going to pop up safe and sound and wondering what all the fuss is about," but it was said to comfort, and the note of conviction had gone.

Barkley had been silently following this exchange, leaning back in his chair, his doe-soft eyes flitting from one face to the other. Now he returned all four chair legs to the carpet and said, "You're really serious about all this, aren't you?"

Kirk nodded tightly, not trusting himself to give a charitable answer.

"In that case," Barkley continued, "I'd better find you somewhere to set up a control room. A park bench has very limited facilities, and," he added with only a touch of malice, "if you're going to make a habit of losing people, you're going to need all the help you can get."

Kirk spread out the maps on the polished walnut table in the room where they had dined such a short time before, but they were hardly needed. Groups had already been allocated to areas, and the search proved to be a weary re-enactment of the preceding day.

McCoy, unable to contribute significantly to the overall sum of effort, and equally unable to stand the inactivity, returned to the hospital and his work with the colonists.

Part way through the morning Scott called down to say that one planet-wide scan had been completed, and that they were beginning a second in the hope of locating something.

Kirk stayed at his post morosely checking off completed sections, and searched in the only way available to him by opening his mind, that part of him that was always subliminally aware of Spock's presence, the subconscious receptivity that had forged them into the formidable command team and close-knit friends they were, whilst the old Earth-style long case clock against the far wall told off the seconds with relentless tread, and its hands made nonsense of the Leonardan day.

By midday he could stand it no longer and made his way to the hospital, where he shared a gloomy cup of coffee with McCoy.

"Damn Vulcan!" McCoy growled, glaring resentfully at his plastifoam cup. "Always getting under your feet except when he's wanted, and then he's nowhere to be found." But his eyes said something other.

Shortly thereafter Kirk made a round of the still searching teams. Mandala Flynn's emerald gaze registered the tension that thrummed in him like a plucked bowstring. She unfolded her map and indicating the areas now eliminated said quietly,

"Don't worry, we'll find him, sir. It's something that we haven't uncovered his body."

The grin that answered her was positively feral. "You betcha! We're not beaten yet. How long before the search pattern is complete?"

"About two hours."

"Good. Finish up and report to me. Officers of Mr. Spock's calibre and experience don't just vanish into thin air for no good reason. If he hasn't turned up by then, I'm going to start making hell hotter for one or two people on Leonardo's until I get some answers."

Unwilling to demotivate his security teams by breathing too closely down their necks, Kirk walked back towards the centre of Marciana. Instinct prompted him to remain on the planet's surface, but honesty impelled him to admit that he has reached an impasse, and with nothing further to work on he could be more profitably employed on the ship. As he lifted his communicator from his belt it beeped. The call coincided so perfectly with his decision that he was momentarily nonplussed when instead of Uhura's voice McCoy said,

"Jim, any chance you could drop by here 'bout six p.m., local time? There's something I'd like to show you."

There was a note of suppressed excitement beneath the laconic tone, and Kirk felt his pulse quicken in response.

"I could come now," he volunteered hopefully.

"Be better later. I'm a mite tied up at the moment."

"Fair enough. See you at six. Kirk out."

Kirk closed his communicator and stood staring thoughtfully at it, re-running the conversation in his mind. Cantankerous McCoy undoubtedly was, but he would never deliberately waste his Captain's time by leaving him cooling his heels unless there was a damned good reason for it. Kirk checked his chrono and discovered that he had two hours to kill. Resigned to his fate, he re-opened his communicator and moments later he was back on the ship.

The return to the ship meant a return to Normal Life with capital letters. Thrones might fall and Vulcans vanish, but their relative importance in the overall scheme of things was, Kirk decided, purely a matter of viewpoint.

He found Scott suitably concerned but happily dividing his time between the exigencies of Command and the delights of the engine room, and Dr. Bryant and his arch rival-in-finance, Dr. Blair from Xenobiology, lying in wait for their Captain. Kirk refereed three rounds and a border skirmish on the subject of departmental planning and finance, which comfortably filled the intervening time before he rejoined McCoy.

Christine Chapel was collating information at a computer terminal. She looked up smiling as Kirk entered and indicated the closed inner door. "Go right in, Captain. He's expecting you."

McCoy, however, was not alone. The room was cool and dim after the brilliance outside, and for a moment Jim mistook the dark-haired girl seated at the table for Lia Burke, the Enterprise's second nurse. A further glance showed him his error, and he was retreating rapidly with a muttered apology when McCoy called out,

"Don't go, Jim. This is someone I'd like you to meet," and continued rather with the air of a conjurer producing a rabbit from a hat, "Marrin, may I introduce Jim Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise. Jim, this is Marrin Endicott."

Up close the resemblance to Lia Burke persisted. They had the same exuberant mass of curly dark hair and clear grey eyes, but there the similarity ended, for whereas Lia's eyes were deep and changeable as the sea, reflecting her every mood from sunlight to storm, Marrin's were shadowed with a sadness that lingered even when she smiled. Her handclasp was surprisingly firm and the clear grey eyes assessed him openly without fear or favour.

Jim held himself still under that cool impartial regard, deliberately subduing his own instinctive charm as inappropriate.

She smiled and said, "Captain, I must apologise for all the cloak and dagger work Dr. McCoy and I have been indulging in, delaying this meeting, but whilst I wouldn't say walls have ears, everybody else certainly has, and for the present I'd very much prefer it if no-one other than yourselves knows that I'm here."

Her voice was low and pleasant, tinged with that same unspoken sadness. Kirk nodded, realised belatedly that he might reasonably be accused of staring, hastily released her hand and waited.

"Captain, I came to warn you that there are Klingons on Leonardo's Planet."

"What?" His hand was halfway to his communicator when her voice stayed him.

"Please wait, Captain. I do not believe your ship is in any immediate danger, and this is important. They are holding prisoner the male population of Marciana."

"But why?"

"Tarasium, Captain. They are using them to mine tarasium."

"Tarasium?" McCoy echoed. "I thought that stuff could only be produced under laboratory conditions?" and at Kirk's bewildered expression added defensively, "I do occasionally read something other than medical journals and the label on a whisky bottle."

Marrin nodded approvingly. "You're quite right, Doctor. Only now we've discovered that it does occur naturally, and the Klingons are using the men as slaves to mine it and as hostages for the good behaviour of their families."

"And how did the Klingons find out about it in the first place when it's been discovered on a Federation colony and the rest of the Federation doesn't even know?" Kirk demanded. "And what about...?" He broke off.

Marrin shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry, Captain - there's an awful lot that I just don't know."

Only McCoy, standing quietly by, caught the quicksilver flash of frustration, instantly leashed, before Kirk said, "There's no need for you to apologise. It's my fault for asking you questions piecemeal and then expecting the answers to make instant sense. It would be better if we sat down and you told us everything you can about the situation."

"Certainly, Captain. What do you want to know?"

Kirk opened his mouth to give an answer, couldn't find one, closed it, tried again, realised he was doing a splendid impersonation of a stranded cod and started laughing in a way that made him look suddenly younger and infinitely more approachable.

"Hell, I don't know. Something, anything, that will help me sort out this whole mess. If I find any more loose ends I may take up macrame."

They laughed together and the reserve that had stood between them melted away.

"I suggest," McCoy said, "that you start at the beginning and tell us everything. That way we'll at least know what's going on, and too much information is a whole heap better than no information at all, which is all we've had until now."

"Agreed," Kirk said. "But first..." He fished out his communicator.

"Enterprise," Scott's voice acknowledged.

"Mr. Scott, you remember those squalls we discussed? Well, I've just received an update on the weather forecast," Kirk glanced across at Marrin and smiled before continuing, "and it seems as though they could be imminent, so keep your eyes peeled."

"Aye, sir, I'll do that."

The reply came with barely a pause and in a manner which left no doubt as to whether Scott had fully understood his Captain's message. Kirk grinned at the other two.

"That should slow their cipher experts down a bit if they're listening. Now then," he seated himself at the desk, all business, "tell me about tarasium."

The girl nodded agreement and smiled over at McCoy. "As I said before, you were quite right, Doctor. At one time tarasium could only be produced under laboratory conditions. It was my husband who proved that it does occur naturally, and on planets with a geological structure like Leonardo's, in large quantities.

"It's funny, really," she continued. "People who are familiar with Trevien's work always associate him with geology. What they don't realise is that he has a joint degree, and that chemistry was his first love. He was working on tarasium in the laboratory when we first met. Besides its obvious military applications, with which I'm sure you are familiar, Captain, it has several valuable uses in the field of medicine, but to be employed widely it is needed in larger quantities than it's feasible to produce in a lab. Trevien always maintained that it could occur naturally, but after we graduated we collaborated on several geology projects, and gradually the theoretical research on tarasium got pushed to one side in favour of other things.

"It was Dr. Sutton who gave Trevien the chance to come here. He'd taken a great interest in Trevien's research work, and supported his theories. When he saw the results of the initial survey by the Beagle, he realised that the

prevailing conditions made the existence of tarasium highly probable, and nominated Trevien as a member of the scientific team. I'm afraid that on this occasion, officially I'm only along for the ride."

Marrin glanced questioningly at McCoy, who was frowning.

"Who is Dr. Sutton?" he asked. "I thought Dr. Taylor was heading up the team here?"

Marrin nodded. "He does now. Originally Dr. Sutton was to have been in charge, but then the poor man had a massive heart attack quite unexpectedly, and couldn't pass the Starfleet medical certifying him fit to be stationed on a frontier world, and Dr. Taylor took over."

"What's he like?" Kirk enquired.

Marrin shrugged. "I'm afraid I can only give you my general impressions. I don't really know him that well. He's academically sound, though probably less talented than Dr. Sutton, but then maybe I'm biased. He's pleasant enough to deal with, if a bit crusty." She grinned suddenly. "He doesn't suffer fools gladly, but then that's often the way with academics when dealing with minds they consider to be less able than their own."

"I know what you mean," Kirk agreed with feeling.

"He was terribly distressed when Trevien died," Marrin added, as though trying to be fair.

Sensing her distress, Kirk changed the subject. "Okay, tell me about the project."

Marrin smiled reminiscently. "After all those years of work and waiting, in the end it was so ridiculously simple. Two months after we got here we detected large deposits of tarasium in the hills near the base. No doubts, no fuss, just like that. After all that time Trev had spent slaving over theories and proofs in the lab. He was so thrilled. We were going to release the information immediately, but Dr. Taylor pointed out that another month or so wouldn't be detrimental to us, and it would give the Council additional time to safeguard the mineral rights for the people of the planet, so that they wouldn't get pushed out by some big consortium. And then of course the Klingons came."

"What happened?" Kirk prompted.

"I was up at the base when it happened, so I'm afraid I can't tell you very much. The first I knew of it was when Dr. Phillips arrived back from town, white as his shirt, shaking like a leaf and babbling about these aliens who'd materialised from nowhere and started giving orders. To be honest, I thought to begin with that the heat had got to him." She laughed, but without humour. "It stopped being funny pretty quickly after that. Actually, I only ever saw a Klingon close enough to speak to on one occasion, and that was when their commander came to see Dr. Taylor.

"I don't know why the Klingons left us alone, but they did. Perhaps they thought that we had too many off-planet contacts for our disappearance to pass unnoticed. Commander Kereth made a lot of threatening noises about what would happen to us if we disobeyed orders and let anything slip, but apart from that it was business as usual and we were expected to carry on as though nothing had happened. Shortly after that we saw people being taken up to the mines."

"Mines? What mines?" Kirk and McCoy demanded virtually in chorus.

Marrin blinked up at them nonplussed, still caught in the web of memory, then she smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, I forgot you wouldn't know. There

were mines already in existence on Leonardo's when we arrived. Trevien and I stumbled across them by accident one day. I'd hazard a guess that they were originally made for mining tarasium. It's too big a coincidence otherwise that they're sited so close to the richest deposits. But whoever made them never finished the job. They'd been long deserted by the time the colonists got here."

"Could it be the Klingons, Jim?" McCoy suggested. "That would account for how come they knew the stuff was there."

"Not unless they started mining tarasium about a hundred years ago," Marrin said. "That's how long I'd estimate those mines have lain unused."

"I can't imagine the Klingons willingly abandoning any planet where they've had any kind of a legitimate toe-hold for as long as that, Neutral Zone or no Neutral Zone. Or that the Federation would expect them to, if it comes to that," Kirk said. "No, I'm afraid we're going to have to look elsewhere for the answer to that particular mystery."

"They certainly moved quickly enough to ship people up there," Marrin commented. "I didn't see much of the actual operation - you can't see the road from the base - but we could hear the engines of the transport lorries revving as they came up the hill for the best part of a day, and I got glimpses of them through the trees as they swung round and along the other side of the valley."

"Y'know, I'd bet my Sunday suit that's where Spock is now," McCoy murmured.

"Sorry, Bones, no takers. I'm sure of it," Kirk replied.

"That's assuming he's still alive." McCoy's voice was grim.

"He's alive!" Kirk snapped with such a ferocity of determination that McCoy forbore to comment further.

"We heard the last of the trucks pull up the valley," Marrin said, "and the next time Trevien and I went up that way the mine entrances had disappeared as though they'd never existed."

"My god," McCoy said, "it sounds like a nightmare version of the Pied Piper of Hamelin."

The girl sighed. "I knew no-one would ever believe that, but it happens to be true."

"Oh but I do," Kirk interrupted. "In some ways it makes better sense than all the rest of it put together. The Klingons have what we call a 'cloaking device'. Basically it's a mechanised cloak of invisibility. Usually they're used to camouflage their warships, but I see no reason why they couldn't be used to mask activity on the planet surface."

Marrin laughed. "Thanks. You've no idea how good it feels to know that I haven't gone completely insane." She sobered again. "After that, things went back to normal for us. Or as normal as they can be under circumstances like that. Most of us were frightened, though we never discussed it and wouldn't have dreamed of admitting it. Trevien hated it. He resented the fact that people were being forced to live in fear." She laughed again, softly, at the memory. "You'd have liked my husband, Captain. His mind and body might have been those of a trained geologist but his soul was that of a swashbuckler. He was determined not to sit back and just let it all happen. He wanted to do something more positive, but Dr. Taylor was dead against it."

"You know, this is probably what was making Phillips so jumpy when we were up at the base," Kirk said. "I got the feeling he was trying to tell us

something, but I couldn't figure out what it was. He must have been hoping I'd take the hint and investigate a bit further. What I don't understand is why Taylor said nothing. I know they must be kept under surveillance, but he could have given us some clue."

"Fear, perhaps," McCoy said. "He's a scientist, a man of intellect rather than action. A bit like myself really."

Kirk stifled his first lighthearted response to that comment out of deference to Marrin, only to realise that the girl was lost in thought and had missed the latter part of the exchange altogether. Feeling the gaze of both men on her she surfaced gradually and said pensively,

"No, not fear. This will probably sound downright bitchy, but it's not meant to. Knowing Dr. Taylor, he was probably motivated by professional pride. To be honest with you, I don't think he cared who was running the planet, so long as we could finish the project. Even if it meant suppressing Trevien's work. He and Trevien argued about it quite violently one time, then Trevien took matters into his own hands and sent that message. A week later he was dead."

At his post by the filing cabinet McCoy stirred restlessly. "Marrin, I have to ask you this, but do you think there is any chance that Trevien was killed deliberately?" he said.

For a long moment the girl continued to gaze at her linked hands, the skin showing ivory beneath the pressure of her fingers before the candid grey eyes lifted to his face. "Doctor, I've lost count of the number of times I've asked myself that same question. My immediate and instinctive reaction is 'yes'. Trevien was good at his work. He knew better than to take chances somewhere where the strata were so unstable, and there was certainly something worrying him. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but he did insist that we keep a hard copy of all his records." She reached out to indicate a pile of computer printout lying hitherto unnoticed on the desk. "This will give you all the details about tarasium deposits on Leonardo's," she said.

"It would seem as though he was right to worry, Mrs. Endicott," Kirk said gently. "Someone has been adulterating the official records. Mr. Spock and I ran them through the base computer, albeit unofficially, and there's not even a passing reference to tarasium in them now."

"Supposing he was killed deliberately," Marrin continued, "the question still remains, who would do such a thing? Dr. Phillips wouldn't harm anyone, of that I'm certain. We didn't get to know Dr. Sheng and Dr. Dubois all that well, but then they never took any interest in Trevien's project anyway. Which leaves Dr. Taylor, and I can't believe that he would be involved. Selfish and self-seeking he may be, but I can't see him as a murderer. He was genuinely distressed by Trevien's death. He came to see me just before the funeral. I'm afraid I wasn't very nice to him, simply because he was civil to the Klingons. But when I couldn't stand the thought of going back to the base, somehow he obtained permission from the Klingon commander for me to stay on here in Marciana." She stopped abruptly, staring fiercely and fixedly out of the window to where a sunset was building, golden and glorious.

Kirk waited a few moments while she gained control, then said, "Where was Jerom Barkley during all this?"

McCoy blinked and favoured him with a hard stare, but said nothing.

Marrin sighed. "He co-operated with the Klingons and has done ever since. I suppose you could call him a collaborator, but then again, what choice did he have? People's lives were at stake, and what do you do under those circumstances when you know that the cavalry isn't going to come over the hill?"

Kirk raised an eyebrow, but otherwise made no comment. He sat for a moment, a thoughtful finger tapping against his lips, then he was out of his chair, quartering the tiny room, his own charged energy impatient of confinement, pacing his thoughts with every step.

McCoy occupied the vacated chair and sat watching him for a while. "What's the next move?" he asked eventually.

Kirk came to lean on the desk. "Hopefully we can tidy up the mysteries afterwards, but right now the first priority is to get those colonists safely out of the mines. How we do it is of course a slightly more difficult question to answer."

Marrin looked up and smiled. "That's the other thing I came to tell you, Captain. Parts of Leonardo's Planet are honeycombed with caves. They probably formed the basis for the mines in the first place. There's an underground river that Trevien and I explored. The cave system it runs through connects with the mines." Her smile became quietly jubilant. "I can show you the back door into the tarasium mines."

She had the undivided attention of both men now. Kirk looked as though he hardly dared to breathe.

"You're sure of this?"

"Positive."

"Could you draw us maps and schematics?"

"If necessary."

Slowly Kirk's smile grew to match her own. "In that case, I think we're in business. Bones, will you do the honours with the subcutaneous transponder?"

It was Marrin's turn to look confused.

"It's okay," said McCoy, loading the hypospray. "It won't hurt. Well, not much anyway." He grinned. "Since you were seen to arrive here it might be better if you were also seen to leave - alone." He pressed the hypo against the girl's arm and pushed the plunger home.

"Go home," Kirk continued. "That little gizmo that Bones just gave you will tell us where you are. We'll wait an hour then beam you up to the Enterprise, and no-one any the wiser." He held out his hand. "Thank you for having the courage to come and tell all this. We'll see you aboard the Enterprise in an hour."

CHAPTER X

"There you have it, ladies and gentlemen." Kirk rested his clasped hands on the table in front of him while his gaze ran over the small circle of alert, receptive faces gathered round the briefing room table. They were all there. McCoy, Uhura, Scott, Sulu, Chekov, Mandala Flynn and Marrin Endicott, who had just provided the diagrams and description of the underground river and cave system which would - with luck - provide the back door to freedom for the trapped colonists.

By unspoken consent the chair immediately to his right had been left vacant. *Absent friends*, Jim thought wryly, and continued, "Scotty, the Klingons are sitting there snug behind their cloaking device waiting for us to make the first move. I don't want to disappoint them, but I'm not going to walk in through the front door either. I want to go in sneaky, round the back."

"Aye, sir. I ken that. But it'll no' be easy."

Kirk grinned. "Scotty, the day you tell me it will be is the day I start worrying."

"Aye, well I can put you down by yon great hole neat enough, but after that the readings on the tunnels start to get blurred by the cloaking device. If I try to send you any further down you could end up materialising in solid rock."

"Which would rather cramp our style. Point taken, Scotty. We walk. Mr. Sulu, how many of that ninja team of yours do you reckon would be willing to put their training into practice?"

Sulu flushed with surprise and pleasure. "All of them I should think, sir."

"And that would be?"

"Fifteen, sir."

"Good. Ask them. Ms. Flynn, we'll make up the numbers with other security guards, but I'm running this on a strictly volunteers-only basis."

"In that case you can count me as your first volunteer," Sulu said enthusiastically.

"Me too, sair," Chekov chimed in.

Scott opened his mouth to speak, but Kirk raised a hand to forestall him.

"Sorry, Scotty, but I need you and Uhura to watch our backs for us."

"I was afraid ye were going to say that, sir. Well, if ye're all goin' tae gae doon a cave wi' Klingons at the bottom of it, ye canna gae spannelin' around in helmets wi' lights on the front of them. It'd be like pinning a target on your chest and blowin' a whistle tae tell them when tae shoot ye."

"Think you can do anything about that for us, Scotty?"

"Aye, I reckon. How many of ye will there be?"

"About forty."

"Well, if the lads and I put in a wee bit of overtime tonight, we should be able tae have something ready for ye along wi' the rafts and other gear."

"Marrin, we'll need the best schematics and maps of that cave system you can give us. We're none of us experienced cavers, and we'll need all the help we can get."

The girl smiled. "I can do better than that for you, Captain. I'm coming along to act as guide."

Kirk's balled fist hit the table. "No way! I may be known as 'Mad Jim Kirk' in some quarters, but my particular form of insanity does not extend as far as endangering the lives of civilians. Guide or no guide, I assure you there is not a snowball's chance on Vulcan of your going along."

Marrin listened in polite and interested silence to the whole of this speech. When it became apparent that he had in fact paused for breath she said quietly, "I'm sure that in Starfleet it is not the done thing to argue orders, and therefore your word is probably law, Captain. Fortunately, as a civilian I need suffer no such constraints." The grey eyes lifted to meet his. "There is

every chance that my husband died because of what happened here. You have no jurisdiction over me, Captain Kirk, and I repeat, I am coming with you."

The silence which followed was deafening. Around the table people assiduously studied their notes, files and the table top, and braced themselves for the explosion.

Very gently McCoy put out a hand to touch Kirk's sleeve and said, "You know she's right, Jim. Having somebody along with us who actually knows the way is going to make a hell of a difference to our chances of pulling this stunt off. And you *did* say you were working this on a strictly volunteers-only basis."

Blue eyes clashed with hazel, and held. After a moment Kirk sighed.

"I am clearly the victim of a conspiracy here." He swung round at Marrin. "All right, you can go. But understand this. Civilian or no, from now on you follow orders. Scotty, are you *sure* there's no chance at all of you being able to set us down inside the mine and save us all a lot of time, effort and aggravation?" He looked pointedly at Marrin.

"Aye, sir, I am. Like I said, near the surface the tunnels are all blurred wi' yon cloaking device, and further down the readings are too faint. Either way ye could end up wi' your boots set in solid rock."

"Thanks, Scotty. I tried. Any more questions, ladies and gentlemen?" There was a general shaking of heads. "Very well, posts everyone, then get an early night. Equipment familiarisation and final briefing in the cargo transporter room at 03.00 planet time. We beam down at 04.00 hours planet time tomorrow."

The briefing room cleared with a scraping of chairs and a shuffling of feet. Only McCoy lingered.

"What is it, Bones?" Kirk asked. "Got a bad conscience about Marrin?"

"Nope. We both know she's right, and I'm volunteering too."

"You?" Kirk paused in the midst of scooping up papers. "You won't like it, you know."

"Never said I would. I'm a doctor, not a mole. But Spock ain't here, and I figure you need someone along on this expedition with a mite more sense than a boll-weevil, so I'm volunteering."

Kirk grinned and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Thanks, Bones. Better tell Scotty to up his production figures by one, then, and get yourself some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see our guest safely installed, and then back to the planet for a while. I'm going to have a short talk with Jerom Barkley."

* * * * *

Kirk went looking for Marrin and found her at last on the Observation Deck, looking out at the planet hanging vast and luminous below her, a still dark figure, the glory of the starfield making a nimbus about her, wearing her loneliness like a mantle. She did not move when he stepped up beside her, and they stood in silence side by side for a while. Eventually she stirred, and still looking out towards the planet and the stars, said,

"For three months I've waited for this moment, Jim. Believed in it, prayed

for it. I was so certain that if only help would come and everyone be saved then the pain would stop, and now we're standing on the very brink of everything I've hoped for, I find it makes no difference. Trevien is dead, and I feel just as cold and empty as I did before." She lifted her head to look at him, and the starlight made silver of the tear tracks on her face.

Kirk turned her gently to him, gathering her close, offering not passion but tenderness, understanding and the comfort of Human warmth. He felt her resist momentarily, then subside against him, the hot tears soaking his shirt, and he could feel her shaking with the release of pent-up grief.

"It will pass," he said softly, stroking her hair. "I promise you. I know to begin with it's like standing at the foot of a cliff that looms over you and shadows everything you see or do, but with time it recedes a little so that you'll find you can see round the edges of it, and the road goes on until you discover that those memories are something that you take a detour from the mainstream of your life to visit, and even then you remember more of the joy than the pain."

He paused, remembering, and then standing there in the silvered darkness, with the jewelled beauty of the planet behind them, he told her about Edith. Spoke of it as he never had before to anyone, even in the days following her death. Gradually he felt Marrin still within the protective circle of his arms. Gently he hooked two fingers under her chin and tilted her head up to look at him. And then, because her glass-grey eyes reflected the starlight and she was brave and lovely, he kissed her.

It started as a brotherly kiss intended to comfort, but the intensity of his reaction and her response caught them unprepared, and the kiss deepened as they clung together in mutual need and a hunger bred of loneliness for a few moments before they drew apart and walked, hands linked, to the door.

At the doorway to her cabin Marrin turned to face him and Kirk drew back smiling. For him Edith would always remain a bitter-sweet memory, but he had had time to adjust to her death, to realise that life must continue and that he could love again; but for Marrin the wound was still too new, that time still in the future. Instead he lifted her hand to his lips and felt her fingers curl responsively around his. She lifted her free hand to touch his cheek, and the grey eyes smiled.

"Thank you, Jim," she said simply, and was gone.

Walking slowly back to his own cabin, Kirk reflected on Marrin's reaction and his own. Marrin needed time before she could allow herself to become involved, a fact irreconcilable with the demands of Starship life, but for his own part he knew that if he allowed himself, he could care. He could care very deeply indeed.

For a few minutes he allowed himself to consider the truth of that realisation, then he set the thought regretfully aside and strode towards the transporter room. He had an appointment to keep with the planetary governor.

* * * * *

Barkley was working at his desk in the comfortable over-filled study. He glanced up at the sound of the door latch, took a longer look at Kirk's face and laid aside his pen.

"I know why you're here, Jim," he said.

"All right, so now we both know that there are Klingons crawling all over this colony of yours. Klingons who are currently holding prisoner the male population of the main town, who killed one of my men and have presumably

captured or killed my First Officer."

"Presumably. I wouldn't know. I wasn't there."

Kirk didn't know precisely what kind of reaction he had been anticipating. Defiance, perhaps, or maybe guilt. Certainly not this kind of weary resignation. It checked the hot flow of his anger.

Barkley waved a vague hand towards a chair. "Sit down. I need a drink. Do you want one?"

"No, but I want some answers. Why, Jerom?"

"For Chrissakes, Jim, you lead, you command - use your head!" His eyes met Kirk's squarely over the glass in his hand. "These are my people, Jim. They look to me. I am responsible for them." He drew a deep breath and sat down, his face subdued, remembering.

"We had no warning. One day the Klingons simply beamed down into the piazza and began rounding everybody up, just like a bad old science-fiction movie, and that was it. John McCluskey, Brad's brother, tangled with them, made a fuss, and he got shot. That's why Brad blames me, because after that we co-operated. The men got taken away up into the hills somewhere, I don't even know what for, but at least everyone was still alive, and provided we behaved ourselves would stay that way. The women and children were hostages for the men's good behaviour, and vice-versa. Somebody had to act as liaison between the colonists and the Klingon commander. I was already the mayor, I got the job. My people are farmers, Jim, not soldiers, and in any case I had that damned Klingon Koor watching me. What could I do?"

"You could have trusted me."

"Oh for god's sake, Jim, be reasonable. The continued survival of half the population of this planet depended on my decision. The first sign of you charging in full of righteous anger and flying the flag of freedom, and those people would be exterminated. Look at you now. How did I know what your reaction would be?"

Kirk took a deep breath and let it out hard. "Fair enough, but I am going to do something now. You may have maintained the status quo, but it isn't acceptable to the Federation to have a Klingon outpost this side of the Neutral Zone, and I'm damned sure it isn't acceptable to your people to be working themselves to death in Klingon-run mines. There's a chance that a small force could..."

"Now hold it right there, Jim! This'll have to go before the rest of the council. I can't give you permission to endanger the lives of all these people."

"I don't need permission, Jerom, and I am doing it."

"You can't just come barging in like this laying down the law. What happened to the Non-Interference Directive?"

"It doesn't apply in this case. Starfleet Regulations 71, paragraph 2. Quote: 'A Starship Commander has the right to intervene in the development and government of a colony if he believes that the prevailing conditions are detrimental to the wellbeing of the colonists.' Unquote. Enforced physical labour mining tarasium is detrimental to anyone's wellbeing. Sorry, Jerom, but there it is."

Barkley looked down at his clasped hands resting on the desk. All the fight seemed suddenly to have left him. He looked tired and defeated. "What do

you plan to do?" he asked.

"The mine entrances are shielded by a cloaking device, but there seems to be a back entrance through a cave system. I'm going to take a small group of my people in that way. With luck it'll all be over before the Klingons know what's hit them."

"When will you go?"

"Tomorrow."

"That soon? Well, you'll have the element of surprise. It might just work. You always were a lucky devil."

"You make your own luck."

"Perhaps. But I'll say it anyway." Barkley rose to his feet, extending his hand. "Good luck, Jim."

CHAPTER XI

Dawn planetside, and Korrygane's first tentative light had drawn the mist knee high in the hollows. Most of the contingent of Enterprise crewpeople stood or sat in small groups, silent, or in a few cases making desultory conversation, Kirk suspected more than a little in awe of their surroundings.

Once, when on Earth, Jim Kirk had stood to watch the sun rise above the circle of standing stones on Salisbury Plain, awed by the face of majesty. No hand of man had fashioned *this* dance of giants. Vast rocks, four times higher than a man, lay slanted, leaning upon each other's shoulders as though the earth in some primeval game of chance had shaken them, tumbling them like dice all awry, and man, dwarfed to insect insignificance, could walk amongst the crevices between.

The Enterprise team now waited, mist-wrapped, in such a hollow. Six crewmen were working at the mouth of a cave tucked like a badger's set beneath one mighty boulder, watched and encouraged by their nearest neighbours. Morale was high; jibes and laughter flew with the stone chippings. Kirk walked past them up the slope of the hollow, where the dew furred the grass like the bloom on a plum, to look out across the hidden landscape where the still invisible sun lightened the mist to pearl.

And how did he feel? he wondered, hearing their laughter, and knew the answer. Alone. His was the responsibility for what they had to do, and there was no-one in that laughing, trusting group to share the load. It was both the privilege and the price of command, he knew, but the price was high.

Standing there, drawn in upon himself by the mist, he gathered up his strength of mind and will and *Reached*. At other times, in similar desolate moments when the plans were drawn and the decisions made and all the shouting over, before the final commitment to action, he fancied he had reached out to Spock in this same way and had been answered. No message, just the unspoken comfort of his presence and the bedrock certainty of his support that warmed Kirk's soul. He had never spoken openly of it to the Vulcan for fear of having the comfort of the illusion - if illusion it was - shattered by a denial, or of embarrassing his friend by forcing a confirmation from him. Now he waited, open and searching, but there was no response.

Suddenly chill, he hugged his arms, feeling the moisture beading on his suit slick and wet beneath his fingers. Looking back he saw Sulu straighten up from an inspection of the cave mouth. Someone waved an arm, pointing in his direction. Sulu left the group and began to climb towards him. Slowly Kirk

walked down to meet him across the dew-grey, short cropped grass.

Unfamiliar in a wet suit, twin to the one that Kirk now wore, Sulu contrived to look young, confident and scared to death all at one and the same time. He carried a helmet in the crook of his arm, and a spare, which he offered to Kirk.

"We're nearly ready, sir. I hope these visors that Mr. Scott's team dreamed up work as well as he says. It's as black as the inside of your hat in there."

Like digging the lair of a wild animal, the narrow aperture beneath the rocks had been gouged and smashed to allow freer passage, the grass around it mud-caked and trampled. McCoy stood watching the first coil of the fine-linked supple metal ladders being manhandled into position and unreeled, flexible and serpentine, to disappear into the depths.

"Y'know, I keep expecting something to come charging out of there madder'n hell 'cause we've busted up its living room," he said.

Kirk gave a mock shudder. "I sincerely hope not. We'll have quite enough trouble with the Klingons without taking on the local fauna, thank you all the same."

Marrin, standing quietly at his elbow, laughed and said, "No dragons, I can promise you, Doctor." And then more seriously, "Captain - Jim - I know it is your inclination as well as your prerogative to lead, but Trevien and I explored this cave system from end to end. It might be wiser, I think, if you would let me go first."

Kirk saw the amusement dance in her eyes as she watched chivalry do combat with commonsense and lose. The amusement turned to delighted laughter as with exaggerated courtesy he bowed her towards the ladder.

"Your cavern awaits, my lady."

* * * * *

Poised on the slender, swaying ladder some twenty yards down the vertical natural chimney, Kirk dropped the visor of his helmet and the last tenuous gleam of daylight vanished completely.

"Ye'll be able tae hunt a black cat in a cellar wi' those wee things, nae problem, provided naebody strikes a light," Scott had said. Sure enough, the walls of the tunnel and the ladder sprang into being around him clear in every detail, though strangely monochrome, like candle wax seen through a red filter. The second part of Scott's statement had already been put to the test during equipment familiarisation whilst still aboard the Enterprise. Anything brighter than the merest glimmer of light overloaded the delicate sensors in the helmet, rendering the wearer blind. "Worse'n a mole in sunlight," McCoy had grumbled. Scott himself had been both apologetic and anxious about the limitations, but anything more sophisticated would take time to develop - time which they simply did not have.

Kirk began the slow descent, the walls as close as a skin about him, buffeting back and shoulders, knees and feet at the slightest unguarded movement. *This must be how a genie feels going back into the bottle*, he thought grimly as the walls moved slowly past him.

Long ago he had forced himself to overcome the claustrophobia which could have stood between himself and a career in Starfleet, and in all his starfaring it had never troubled him since, perhaps because however cramped the living conditions, subconsciously he was always aware that his ship was but a

cockleshell, beyond whose fragile encompassing walls lay all the vast and trackless deeps of space.

Nothing in his life had prepared him for this constricted darkness, the sheer mass of rock weighing down upon him. His breath roared in his ears, the ladder twitched in his hands like a living thing as the next man began his descent. Kirk reached down, groping with his foot for the next rung of the ladder, and connected with solid rock. A hand tapped him on the shoulder, and Marrin leaned back into the curve of the tunnel to make room for him to crouch beside her.

Lt. Carter appeared above them and dropped down to join them. The rest of the party arrived in small groups neatly sandwiched between consignments of equipment to which, even in the confined space available, it was possible to attach anti-gravs before moving along the tunnel. Sulu, still on the surface, was using his head.

In fairly short order Kirk and Marrin, backing up along the narrow tunnel, found themselves at the head of a column of neatly organised equipment interspersed with gently panting crewpeople.

The next stage of the journey was comparatively easy, following a gentle downward slope, although the height of the roof compelled the majority of the party to progress bent over at an angle which reduced neck and shoulder muscles to silent agony within a very few minutes.

Somewhere down the line an irrepressible Carter could be heard enquiring what swung around Paris at midday wrapped in plastic. Following the punchline, "The Lunchpack of Notre Dame", Jim used his command voice to remind them that this was not a Sunday-school outing, and silence prevailed until Marrin stopped so sharply that Kirk all but ran into her, and was himself bumped from behind by McCoy, who backed off muttering that nobody's brake lights were working properly.

"We've just reached the first snag," Marrin said regretfully.

"Well you did warn us it was going to happen," Kirk said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. Over her shoulder he could see where the roof sloped sharply down to meet the surface of the water that lay across their path.

"It's not actually very dangerous," the girl continued, mainly for the benefit of Sulu, who had contrived to work his way forward through the press of bodies to join the conference. "Just disconcerting to anyone who isn't used to caving." She crawled to the edge of the water, and Kirk followed her.

"I'll field, Mr. Sulu, if you'll pitch," he said, and turned to watch as Marrin disappeared into the icy depths.

She was right, of course, he told himself. It wasn't dangerous; it was simply the sensation of being trapped as one turned on one's back in the water to bend around the downward projecting roof, the dull rasp of stone down the chest and waist and thigh, and the wholly irrational fear of not reaching the surface on the other side.

Gasping, he hauled himself out and twisted back towards the pool he had just left. The water thrashed wildly - Sulu had lost no time in sending the first man through. Plunging an arm down he grabbed at an unseen collar and hauled. McCoy surfaced, blowing water like a baby whale and swearing with the little breath which remained to him.

"Captain, sir," he said when he could speak again, "if and when we ever return to the Enterprise, I should like you to take a good long look at my job description. You will find it says I am a doctor, not a damned potholer!"

"Calm yourself, Doctor," Kirk contrived to suppress his amusement at his friend's wrath. "It wasn't all that bad. All you needed was a little faith."

"Yes, Doctor. Remember," Marrin added, "faith can move mountains."

Carter, surfacing in time to hear this exchange, smiled reminiscently and murmured, almost to himself, "Yeah, she's a big girl, Faith."

McCoy's eyes closed as though in prayer.

Doubled over in the cramped space by the water splash, Kirk lent a hand and counted heads as people and equipment followed in quick succession. Thirty eight... Thirty nine... Swoosh! Sulu's head broke the surface, sleek as a seal and grinning hugely.

"This is incredible!" he enthused. "Next long shore leave I get, I'm going to do some serious caving."

Chekov paused in the act of proffering a helping hand and considered his colleague closely. "I tink I vas less worried about you when you thought you vere D'Artagnan," he said eventually.

With the party reassembled Kirk called for a short rest and a check of tricorder readings.

"Nothing shows except us, sir," Carter said, revolving slowly, tricorder in hand.

Peters, peering over his shoulder, put out a detaining hand and pointed to the screen. "There's another funny dip in the readings again, sir, just like the one Mr. Spock and Fisher picked up when they were surveying up near the geology base. Fisher thought it might be a characteristic of the rock."

"What did Mr. Spock think it was?" Kirk asked.

"He didn't know, sir; or if he did, he didn't say."

A small red alert sounded somewhere at the back of Kirk's skull. "Thank you, Mr. Peters. All right, ladies and gentlemen, let's continue, but keep your eyes and ears open. Mr. Carter, I want tricorder readings taken at five-minute intervals, and if that dip so much as twitches I want to know about it."

It was, Kirk concluded thankfully, a suicidal commander who would spring an ambush under the present conditions, for the tunnel widened out to the proportions of a cavern, its precise boundaries lost in the surrounding dark but of a height which forced them to crawl on hands and knees and occasionally on their bellies between floor and ceiling laced with stalactites and stalagmites, so that it seemed as though they threaded their way between the hanging gems of a giant necklace across a bed of nails.

Fragile as snow crystals and delicate as lace though they might appear to be, the stalagmites were nonetheless rock, solid and unyielding and desperately uneven, jabbing painfully at hands and knees and reducing progress to a snail's pace. Their only piece of good fortune lay in the fact that the width of the cavern meant that they were no longer compelled to travel in single file, and those moving equipment could be relieved on a turn and turn about basis.

Kirk was pushing one of the anti-grav supported packed rafts ahead of him, a process which preserved his hands at the expense of his knees, when Marrin once again held up a hand to call a halt and sat down.

Shaking damp hair from his eyes Kirk was momentarily puzzled, until he realised that she was in fact seated on the edge of a small, irregular gap in

the previously solid floor. He crawled forward to join her, together with McCoy and Sulu. Marrin was grinning triumphantly when they reached her.

"We've made it!" she said. "The river's down there." And sure enough, above the thunder of the blood in his ears Kirk could hear an answering thunder of water.

"Oh rapture," McCoy remarked without conviction, peering dubiously through the inadequate-looking crevice into the lightless depths.

"I know one thing," Kirk said. "We won't get the packs through there. I'm not sure I could get through there. And before you say anything, Bones, you win. I'll pay attention the next time you tell me to go on a diet!"

In the end it was easier than it had seemed at first. The dimensions of the aperture yielded to friendly persuasion and the judicious use of a phaser. Climbing down a rope through the enlarged entrance, Kirk found himself oscillating gently like a weight on a plumb-line in a cave resembling an inverted funnel, above the surface of the river. A little gentle effort increased the momentum of his movement, so that at the widest point of the arc he was able to drop, landing dry-shod on a narrow shelf of rock beside the surging water. From there it was easy enough to fix a line to enable the rest of the party to descend.

Safely down, some of the group set up small arc lamps to enable everyone to have a rest from the strange vision provided by the helmets, and to give enough light to facilitate the unpacking of the four ten-man inflatable rafts that were to carry them on the next leg of their journey.

Black as Styx and cold as steel, the river ran with the speed of an express train. McCoy looked up without enthusiasm as Kirk dropped down to sit beside him where he perched huddled on a convenient rock. Glancing over his Captain's shoulder to where the first of the boats swerved and plunged like a nervous horse on the end of its tether, the doctor growled,

"Couldn't we have our accident now, Jim, and save waiting for it?" The little that could be seen of the doctor's face was as white as new milk.

"We're ready, sir," Sulu reported cheerfully, picking his way over boulders towards them.

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu," Kirk acknowledged. Under cover of the shadows he laid a hand on McCoy's arm, the only possible acknowledgement he could make of the fact that what for his Helmsman was an adventure par excellence was for his Chief Medical Officer a source of unparalleled terror.

McCoy drew a long breath, sharply released in a long shuddering sigh, but when he spoke his voice was once again an easy Southern drawl. "Don't you worry, Jim boy. I reckon we'll be all right. They say only the good die young. Happen that's true. I'm past when I should have gone, and you're here forever."

The rafts vibrated wildly at the end of their thrumming lines, and boarding them was akin to stepping onto a rabid cakewalk. The Security teams were settling into three of the boats. Kirk briefly considered distributing himself, Sulu, Chekov and McCoy between the four rafts, but abandoned the idea. It might reassure him, but the teams were accustomed to working together and would probably continue to do so better under their own group leaders rather than a comparatively unfamiliar officer.

There were places for six people to man paddles on the inflatable benches with room - if pressed - for an extra four squeezed between them. Sulu and Chekov each took a paddle, followed by Carter and the others. Kirk, wanting to

keep an overall eye on the convoy, opted for a seat amidships, offering an unobtrusive hand to McCoy. They were joined by Marrin, who tried to take up a paddle but was gently but implacably displaced by Peters.

Kirk flipped open the lid of his communicator. "All set, ladies and gentlemen! Very well, on my mark... Now!"

Cutting the mooring ropes was akin to firing a starting gun. The rafts leaped forward, four small arrowheads loosed against the shield of night. The walls spun dizzyingly past, smooth and lightless as graphite, their continuity varied with pillars and ledges and curves, the gothic architecture of the relentless water, glimpsed for an instant before being whirled away in the all-consuming darkness.

Kirk glanced sideways at McCoy. The doctor's face was hidden by his visor but he sat hunched forward, his hands clenched on the grips in the seat, the tendons standing proud.

The raft plunged suddenly, frosting the darkness with spray where the bow dipped and the paddlers mistimed their stroke. His own hands locked around the safety ropes, Kirk twisted to look back at the raft behind, the third no more than a vague smudge in the gloom behind it, the fourth momentarily lost to view. The offside leading oarsman broke rhythm to raise his paddle in salute and Kirk turned back to watch the blackness unfold over Sulu's rhythmically dipping shoulder. He tried to envisage the lunatic courage which would undertake this journey without the certainty of a safe way out, and failed lamentably.

Without warning the inflatables picked up speed. Paddling ceased to be a method of propulsion and became instead a means of fending themselves off walls and the rocks that jutted like blackened teeth against the yeasty maelstrom. Those not wielding paddles clung grimly to their companions, providing anchorage and balance as the wildly plunging boats.

Chekov, with Sulu bracing him, leaned over to thrust them clear of the curving wall. The boat bucked, twisted, and tossed him so that he fell, head down, ploughed relentlessly along between the tough plastic side and the abrading wall. Kirk saw Sulu's mouth open in a yell, the sound lost in the thunder of the water. He flung himself across the intervening tangle of legs and bodies, and felt McCoy's bony weight land across his legs to hold him as his own hands skidded frantically down Chekov's wet suit seeking a grip.

His skittering fingers gained a purchase on a buckle. He grabbed an indiscriminate double fistful and heaved. From the tail of his eye he saw Sulu do the same. Chekov and a considerable amount of excess water deluged backwards into the bottom of the boat.

The sudden shift in weight unbalanced the raft again and it slewed, lurching deliriously. Like a demented pendulum Kirk dived back the way he had come to counterbalance it as they were borne high on a shoulder of white water, spinning towards the unyielding wall. Its curving sweep rose up and up, bending above them so close that it seemed that they must climb it and be spilled; then the effect of the Human ballast began to tell, and the raft slid dizzyingly sideways, tossed out of the mainstream into fast running calmer water.

The tunnel performed a final convolution, the walls swept back, and they were floating on the surface of a vast dark mirror, turning gently in the last eddies of a dying current. Kirk tried his voice, and was amazed to find it came out as a shout instead of a croak.

"Everybody all right?"

There followed a chorus of "Affirmatives" and "Aye, Captains".

"How about you, Chekov?" he asked. Even with the limited vision provided by his helmet he could see that the little Russian was shaking.

Chekov managed a moderately convincing, "Aye, Captain," and added, "but I tink I vill have earned my seat in heaven today."

"Front row of the stalls, with popcorn," Sulu assured him. "Just don't be in such a hurry to claim it." But even the usually irrepressible Helmsman's voice sounded just a little unsteady.

The immediate danger past, people were starting to look around them. The dinghies rode like a flotilla of goslings on the face of a lake whose immensity was lost in the blackness, far beyond the range of their tricorders.

"My god," McCoy whispered, gazing about him. His voice, small and flat-sounding in the vastness, came swooping and bounding back to them amplified with echoes.

A tricorder warbled in Sulu's hand, sounding like an army of crickets. "I read the roof as being about a hundred metres high, Captain, and up to a hundred and fifty in places."

"In the hall of the Mountain King," Kirk murmured quietly.

"I tink I should not vant to meet the Troll King just now," Chekov said plaintively.

"Oh, I don't know," McCoy's voice drifted out of the gloom. "He'd probably be a whole heap more reasonable than the Klingons."

There was a ripple of laughter hastily suppressed and the tension eased.

"From here on we must walk," Marrin announced, squirming round preparatory to sliding over the dinghy's side. "The cavern wasn't always flooded, and there are whole forests of stalagmites just below the surface. It'll slow us down if we have to keep steering around them."

'Cloop.'

Something swirled in the water beyond their range of vision which set the ripples to dancing along the inflatables' sides. Heads turned to follow the sound. Kirk caught at Marrin's wrist, but she calmly slipped free of his restraining hand. Raising her voice a little so that it reached all four boats she said,

"Don't be alarmed. There are fish in the caves that feed off the algae on the rocks. Some of them grow to be quite large, but I assure you they're absolutely harmless. My husband called them Justice Fish, because they're blind."

"Oh. Not because they have scales?" Sulu enquired innocently, and everybody groaned.

"Watch your footing," Marrin added. "There are some deep potholes."

"Everyone stay together," Kirk ordered as they disembarked and took up their places round the rafts. "Keep an eye on your neighbour and make sure there are no stragglers. This is not the place to get lost."

Even through the protective thickness of the wetsuits the water was achingly cold, leeching their strength. Too shallow for swimming in, it was still deep enough to slow their progress to a painful crawl and transform every step into a conscious effort of will.

Kirk's whole world narrowed to the bobbing head of the man opposite to him and the need to place one foot in front of the other. The rafts snagged on stalagmites and protruberances below the waterline and had to be pulled free, wrenching arms and chafing hands to blisters, dragging the unwary painfully against the offending obstructions. Behind him Kirk could hear McCoy swearing sulphurously in a steady monotone. Enough of the monologue was audible above the irregular plashing of the water to convince him that the Doctor was far from happy with his present situation.

Time and distance blurred. They could have travelled a hundred yards or a hundred miles. *Oh for Vulcan time sense*, Kirk thought, and worry and grief rose like bile to choke him. He suppressed them ruthlessly. Regardless of personal feelings, his first concern must be for the safety of the forty people who now followed him trustingly and without complaint. Well, *almost* without complaint, he amended wryly as McCoy let fly with a particularly blistering oath.

The close darkness, with its stale and shuttered feel, so different from the clean dark void of space, was unnerving. Moreover, they were provided with a clear insight into precisely how so many stalagmites - and indeed the lake itself - came to be formed. Drainage water splattered constantly from the roof far above, unerringly penetrating gaps in wetsuits, the final insidious misery.

"Beam me up, Scotty!" Lt. Carter exclaimed with heartfelt sincerity, and Kirk chuckled with the rest at what he knew had become Enterprise-speak for 'Get me out of here!' and applied wholesale by the crew to a variety of nasty situations from which they might wish to be extracted as soon as possible, and covering everything from a bar-room brawl to a paternity suit.

At first the difference was barely perceptible, but within another hundred yards the water had dropped to knee level, and they pulled gradually out of the insistent current that tugged their legs into an area of dead water culminating in a narrow shelf of rock that rose smooth and pale as sea sand from the dark waters of the lake.

Kirk signalled a halt. "Break out the coffee, Mr. Sulu," he said, and the Enterprise crew beached themselves like seals, gratefully flopping down into the shallows and the boats to regain their breath and rest tired muscles.

Lt. Carter sprawled out with exaggerated abandon. "Nice bit of beach we've got here. All we need now are the palm trees and the hula girls."

Jim sloughed off his pack to ease his aching shoulders, but resisted the urge to sit down. He was running on adrenalin, with that high light feeling that makes the brain seem quicker and the muscles tireless. If he unwound now he suspected he'd never get up again.

"Mr. Sulu!" he called.

The Helmsman straightened up from dispensing coffee. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm leaving you in command here. If you don't hear from me in..." he consulted his chrono "... thirty minutes, try to get back to the surface. Get Mr. Scott to advise Starfleet of the present circumstances, and tell him he's to contain the situation as best he can until they can send help."

"But Captain..."

"No buts, Mr. Sulu, and absolutely no attempts at heroic intervention. Do I make myself clear? Your prime responsibility is to Starfleet and these people under your command. When - and only when - Scotty has made contact with 'Fleet, he may exercise his discretion as to whether to make a rescue attempt." Kirk laid a hand on Sulu's shoulder, warmed by the Helmsman's obvious concern, and said as lightly as he could, "The delay really won't make much difference. If

the Klingons decide to shoot me I'll be dead already, and if they decide it's worth keeping me alive it'll be for a few hours." He stooped to gather up his pack.

Marrin was seated, elbows resting on her updrawn knees, head down, hands hanging loosely, but she scrambled to her feet when she saw Kirk preparing to move. "I'm coming with you," she said.

Smiling, he shook his head. "I'll be all right. You'd be better to get some rest while you can."

She returned the smile. "Thank you, Jim, but no. I can rest when all this is over. We're too close and this is too important to take a chance on you falling over a waterfall at this late stage!"

Reluctantly he nodded, acceding to her logic and the generosity of spirit which had already brought her so far.

Stepping between bodies and outstretched legs, Kirk acknowledged the soft-voiced calls of good luck with a half wave. On the water's edge Carter retracted his long legs to let his Captain pass and grinned up at him.

Kirk grinned back. "You take care you don't get a sunburn," he said.

"Yes, sir. Don't reckon it's as sunny as Bondi Beach; weather forecast's good, though." He unfolded himself with lazy grace and stood up. "Mind if I tag along, Cap'n?"

"What for, Lieutenant? The Enterprise already has its full staffing complement of mother hens. I don't need another."

"I'm in Security, sir. Keeping the Captain alive is part of the job. It's self interest really, sir. If anything happened to you, you'd only be dead, sir - I'd have to answer to Dr. McCoy and Mr. Spock!"

If there was an answer to that, Jim couldn't think of it off-hand. "Looks like you just talked yourself into taking a walk, Lieutenant," he said finally.

Another figure detached itself from the group. Even with her distinctive copper hair covered by her hood Kirk had no difficulty in recognising Mandala Flynn, her slight figure at odds with her formidable competence as Security Chief. He held up a hand to forestall the inevitable question.

"I'd like you to stay here, Ms. Flynn. I've got Carter with me, and if anything goes wrong Sulu's going to need all the help he can get."

Her face told him she would have liked to argue the point but she nodded acquiescence and stepped back.

The party turned their backs to the little island of light with its illusion of safety, adjusted their helmets, and Marrin led off into the darkness, moving with the impatient current which pushed and butted ceaselessly at their legs, keeping the little spit of yellow rocks always to their left. Bleached and brittle as the bones of the Kraken, it made a division between the boisterous flow and the quieter water beyond, a geological eccentricity and an unmistakable landmark. *Follow the yellow brick road*, the jingle ran in circles in Jim's weary brain as they followed its curving track until quite suddenly the cavern roof dipped towards them, the channel widened and they found themselves wading in swift-running shallow water amidst a petrified forest of water-worn stone columns.

Carter paused, tricorder in hand. "If they ever get around to developing it, this place could be a tourist trap," he said.

"Very likely. But for the moment, Mr. Carter, I'd prefer to be sure that it's not a Klingon trap. What do your readings show?"

They compared notes.

"Still all clear, sir, apart from that odd dip. 'S a funny thing, but the only time I've ever seen anything like this was when I did a spot of research on the Klingons and came across a record of the sensor readings that you get just before a Bird of Prey decloaks. It looked awfully similar. Do you suppose we could be picking up traces of the cloaking device over the main entrance?"

"Not on a machine this size. I'm getting a very bad feeling about this," Kirk said.

"Me too, sir. Don't worry - I'll keep checking."

They crossed the lagoon without incident, to the point where the cave narrowed to become a tunnel once more. In the relatively confined space Kirk became aware of another sound above the splash and spatter of falling water and the wash of their own passage, a deep and breathing roar that registered at a level below hearing and reverberated in the bones and skull.

The pattern of the river's movement changed again, rushing and leaping between water-polished flat-topped plates of rock which lay loosely interlinked like scattered pieces of a jigsaw, so that the party was able to travel virtually dry shod. At the end of several hundred yards Jim felt Marrin's hand on his to draw his attention before she shouted above the increasing volume of sound,

"Go carefully now, we're nearly there."

Crouching down she moved cautiously towards the end of a long spit of rock, and joining her the two men found themselves looking down to where the glassy sweep of the water dropped to burst and burst again in bright plumes against the jutting rocks below, the spray rising in the slight updraught to prickle their faces with damp.

"Don't reckon I'd fancy trying to get through there," Carter said, pointing to where the roiling water in the plunge basin below gathered itself and surged over the rim to disappear with the force of a steam hammer down a crevice off to one side.

"I wouldn't advise trying it," Marrin said. "They'd have to sieve the outfall to get enough of you together to give you a decent burial. Don't worry - the entrance to the mines is over that way." She gestured into the enveloping darkness.

Carter consulted his tricorder, the trill of the instrument lost in the rush of the water, and scowled. "There's definitely something odd about these readings, sir. They're way off beam."

Kirk tried his own machine, compared the two results, and nodded. "I agree." He started to unship his pack, then stopped as Carter gave a startled exclamation.

"Just for a moment I thought I picked up a life form reading, sir."

"What kind?"

"I'm sorry, sir, it was too quick to be able to tell. If there was anything there it's gone now."

"That settles it. We've no other choice. We must check out the lie of the

land before we take anyone else down there."

Freeing the rope that he carried, Kirk held the anchor pack against a crack in the rock. The detonator coughed once, briefly, driving the head deep into the crevice where it spread out to lock firmly into place. Shaking the coils loose he tossed them out over the lip of the fall and reached for the clip of his safety harness.

A hand closed over the rope just above his own. "'S'all right, Skipper. I'll go down and take a look. Boss lady'd chew my ears off if I let you go."

Kirk frowned. "What Ms. Flynn may have to say on the subject in the future will be nothing compared to what I will have to say right now, Lieutenant, if you try to stop me." The tone was unmistakeable.

Carter snapped to a military brace so fast his spine cracked. "Sir!" Somehow he managed a parade ground salute without relinquishing his hold on the rope.

Kirk hesitated. He knew and acknowledged his own propensity for 'leading the charge', hating to send anyone where he would not go himself, and recognised the validity of Carter's protest, but this was too important to the safety of too many lives for him to reach a decision at second hand.

"Very well, Lieutenant, a compromise. We'll both go. And if it will ease your conscience at all, you can go first."

The scapegrace grin was back as Carter clipped himself to the rope, and his voice was a cheery parody of his own Australian accent. "No worries, Captain!" He gave a salute that was closer to a wave and absailed down in a series of easy bounds that would have done credit to one of his own native bred kangaroos.

Kirk lifted a hand in farewell to Marrin and followed more sedately, undecided as to whether he was more annoyed or amused at being thus outmanoeuvred.

Kirk pushed off for his last jump with enough force to let him clear the plunge basin and reach the smooth floor of the cavern beyond. Some fifty yards away part of the ceiling and wall had disintegrated into a tumbled mound of boulders rising gradually to a cleft high in the wall against which they lay.

As he landed Jim dropped to a crouch, dodging round to join Carter in the lee of some rocks that had rolled clear of the main slide. For a moment they stayed waiting, then peered cautiously out. The cavern remained deserted, any sounds lost in the ceaseless rush of the fall and the booming echo of the water as it hurtled away down the cleft.

Kirk tapped Carter on the shoulder. All expression was lost behind the visor, but he caught the quick answering nod. They broke cover together, sprinting in opposite directions and diving for the cover of the rock pile. Nothing happened.

Feeling slightly foolish, Jim raised his head to see Carter stretched up, craning his neck like a gopher from its sandhole, looking for him. He gave a quick thumbs-up sign; Carter visibly relaxed and began a systematic search of the immediate area. Security trained, the man could be relied upon to dispose of any booby traps or anti-personnel devices which might have been planted. Instead, Jim climbed up towards the cleft Marrin had indicated formed the entrance to the mine. Something or someone was causing those irregular readings, and the possibility that whoever it was might at that very moment be watching them through a gunsight was not comforting.

Phaser drawn, Jim slipped through the cleft into the tunnel beyond. Unlit

and empty though it was, this was undoubtedly part of the mine workings. The walls curved up in a barrel arch over his head, but they were rough-hewn, with none of the grace of the water-worked stone, and the floor was unnaturally even.

Tricorder in hand he followed the tunnel for several hundred yards in one direction, and to a dead end in the other. The instrument registered Carter moving around on the other side of the wall and a fainter static signal which would be Marrin waiting at the head of the waterfall. There was even a faint trace of the rest of the Enterprise group, although at a couple of miles away through virtually solid rock the details were not clear. One thing was certain: there were no other life form readings in the area.

Jim scrambled and slithered back down the tumbled boulders with their myriad crevices to find Carter taking final readings.

"Any luck?" he asked.

The Security man shook his head. "Not a thing, sir," he said glumly. "The whole place is as clean and empty as when the Good Lord made it. But if the Klingons haven't set an ambush here I can't think why not. It's tailor made. You could hide an army in here and not miss it."

Their return to rendezvous with Sulu was accomplished without incident, but Jim's sense of unease persisted and when finally the whole group reached the long rock above the fall he drew Sulu aside.

"We checked that cave every way possible and we still couldn't find an explanation for those readings. It gives me a very bad feeling right about here." Jim tapped the base of his skull. He looked at Sulu, inviting his opinion. Jim habitually consulted his officers. The ultimate decision was his, but he needed the balance of other minds, other ideas to help him reach it. Spock recognised that need and filled it so unobtrusively that as a command team they worked as a balance of opposites, light source and mirror, check weight and counter-balance, welded by time and mutual understanding into a flawless, seamless whole.

But Spock was not there, and McCoy could not help him. To McCoy all life was precious, and none more so than this extended family of the Enterprise crew. What Kirk needed now was the opinion of someone who understood the exigencies of command and the necessity which demanded that those precious lives be put at risk for the sake of the greater good.

Sulu paused, his breath drifting like smoke in the cold air, conscious of his newly acquired responsibility to weigh his words before he spoke. "I know Mr. Spock says that there are always possibilities, sir, but right now I can't think of any. If the Klingons don't know we're here then we're laughing. If they do, there's a good chance they won't have time to harm the colonists, so even if we're attacked we might still be able to save them. But if we turn back, they'll either kill them to cover up what they've been doing, or else more of those poor people are going to die of starvation and abuse whilst we're waiting for reinforcements to arrive."

Jim sighed. Sulu had just given him a neat summary of the conclusions he had already reached. He smiled reassuringly at the Helmsman's anxious face. "Don't worry, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Spock has another saying. 'Seek to master the unavoidable.' Just between ourselves, I've always suspected that it's actually Vulcan for 'When you're fresh out of alternatives, you gotta make the best of what you've got.' I agree with you - we've got no real choice. Get everyone together. We're going on."

CHAPTER XII

Spock surfaced slowly from a darkness deeper than unconsciousness with his nose two inches from a damp and flaking wall and a pain like a knife behind his eyes. His time sense told him that 14.75 hours had elapsed, and his body that he was lying on something narrow and extremely hard.

Vulcan instinct, stronger at that moment than logic, compelled him to struggle upwards against the pain to a sitting position and thence to his feet. The move was ill advised. The room spun like a ferris wheel, nausea twisted his stomach, bile rising in his throat. There was a bucket in one corner; he dropped unceremoniously beside it and clung there shuddering and retching.

Gradually the spasm eased enough to permit an assessment of his surroundings. Four plain stone walls, their monotony broken only by a wooden door, the narrow bed on which he had been lying and the now malodorous bucket completed the inventory.

He took a deep, steadying breath and rose cautiously to his feet. The room pitched and rolled ominously, then settled back into place. Moving with due discretion Spock walked to the door and began a more detailed examination. It was impressively stout, locked with an old fashioned but effective key mechanism, though regrettably no keyhole showed on his side of the door. He was probably in a storage room of some kind, now doubling as a cell. Through a small iron grille Spock could see a bored-looking Klingon armed with a disruptor rifle. His captors were paying him the compliment of taking him seriously.

Spock leaned against the door, testing it with his fingertips. It moved slightly in its frame with a muffled thud. The guard raised his rifle menacingly and shouted something in Standard so vilely accented as to be incomprehensible. The general gist, however, was perfectly clear. Spock was here to stay, wherever here was.

The sound jarred his head and his vision blurred. Carefully Spock returned to the bed and stretched out on it, trying to think past the pain which hammered in his skull and paralysed his mind in defiance of all attempted control.

"One of the most frequently overlooked tactics available to a Starship commander," Jim Kirk said, "is strategic retreat." McCoy expressed it a little more basically. "If it's bigger than you are, run like hell!" What Spock had previously catalogued as mere Human frailty now made reasonably good sense. In his present condition he was in no condition to offer resistance to anything more challenging than a newborn tribble, much less a full-grown Klingon guard outside the door. Abandoning any attempt to move, he lay back on the bed and slipped into a first-level healing trance to assess the damage.

He sensed severe bruising to the bone and damage to some blood vessels as a result of the blow, and he had undoubtedly been drugged, but nothing more serious. There was pain, too, in the nerve centre at the base of his skull, pain which slid elusively away when he brought his concentration to bear on it only to return when he relaxed. He put up an exploratory hand. His fingers came away sticky with semi-congealed blood, but the cut was small and neat, and plainly of no significance. He was, however, forced to acknowledge that his overall physical and mental abilities were severely impaired, and his chances of escape proportionally diminished.

The urge to simply sink deeper into a full healing trance pulled at him strongly and he fought it, forcing himself back to consciousness. To yield now was to render himself inoperative and vulnerable, in need of outside intervention to revive him. Hardly a practical proposition under the prevailing circumstances. It was, however, equally true that he would function more effectively for a period of rest. As an alternative it was slower, but undoubtedly wiser. Composing himself on the bunk he slipped back into

first-level trance, performed the mental disciplines necessary to remain at that level, slowed his heart rate and breathing, and after a while he slept.

He woke as intended precisely six hours later, his mind clear and alert and the pain diminished to a faint tension at the back of his skull. Complete wakefulness was reassuringly immediate. He sat up and his muscles answered him readily, with no lingering traces of drug-induced lethargy.

A different guard was posted outside the door. Catching sight of Spock through the grille, he simply gestured impatiently with his disruptor, indicating that Spock should move away from the door. Obediently the Vulcan returned to the bed and folded himself down onto it to consider his position.

If the guard had changed, plainly the situation had not. He was still a captive. Whilst he had no particular desire to be shipped as a prisoner to Khlinzai, he was less concerned with his own position than with the implications behind it. Worry is a Human emotion; nevertheless Spock was prepared to admit that the situation was disquieting. The manner of his capture and the fact that he had at some point been drugged and then totally ignored for something approaching 20.75 hours implied that his capture was not an end in itself, but merely ancillary to the Klingons' main purpose, whatever that might be. The answer to that question could only be a cause for somewhat disturbing speculation and conjecture.

The speculation might have proved more fruitful with further data to work on, but Spock was forced to acknowledge that, beyond the immediate realities of the four imprisoning walls and the guard outside the door, he had not the remotest idea of where he was.

The general formation of the walls of his cell implied an underground installation of some kind, but as there was no record of any such development on the planet, and since he had told no-one of his initial foray, no-one on the Enterprise would have any idea as to his whereabouts. The only people who knew precisely where he had been taken were the Klingons, and they were unlikely to tell him. This being the case, it was logical to suppose that if a way out was to be found, Spock was going to have to find it for himself.

Jim Kirk had said it was a shame to use a good trick twice. To expect it to work three times was straining favourable random factors to the point of hubris, but Spock was not seeking a commendation for original thinking. Instead he took up his position behind the door, tried to still his inner doubts and uncertainties and *Reached*.

Klingons are notoriously unresponsive to telepathy, hypnosis or mental suggestion, and the guard was more than typical of his breed. Pressed against the wall, with the stone chill against his spine, Spock was acutely aware of his own rigidly controlled breathing and failing mental strength as he strained to implant in his captor's inflexible mind the belief that in spite of the logic of locks and bars Spock of Vulcan was no longer a prisoner, while the Klingon's mind slipped and scurried away from him like a frightened mouse.

In the corridor the Klingon shifted uneasily on his stool, shook his head and waved a hand as though to drive away a persistent fly. Frowning, he surrendered to the sudden nagging doubt and rose to his feet. The sound of the key in the lock almost startled Spock, but by the time the door swung open he was ready. The Klingon sighed and lay down quietly under the influence of a nerve pinch. Spock stepped over him to survey the corridor, then returned to check the body.

He spared a glance for the guard's blaster rifle, still propped against the wall, and rejected it. The advantages of its power would be outweighed by its size and it would be more readily missed. Instead he relieved his victim of his small hand-held blaster and hefted it experimentally. It weighed awkward and

heavy in his palm, being designed to accommodate a broader, squatter hand than his own, and would inflict a wicked injury on any against whom it was used. However, it would be unwise to go unarmed, and there was a dearth of alternatives.

He tucked the gun in his waistband and contemplated the disposal of his victim. The simplest solution, that of locking him in the cell, was not practical. It would be obvious to the first casual passer-by that the guard's post was deserted, and they would be certain to investigate. Spock sighed. The ethics of his behaviour so far did not bear close examination. A Human phrase, 'as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb', sprang to mind. Resigned, he took a firm grip of the guard, hauled him into the corridor, hooked the stool forward with his foot and deposited his burden upon it. A further light mental touch erased all memory of the past few minutes, instilling instead the belief that this had been a quiet watch, together with the fervent hope that his commanding officer would overlook the absence of his blaster, carelessly left behind in his quarters.

This done Spock relocked the cell door, replaced the keys and set about making himself scarce. The end of the corridor connected with another gallery running at right angles to it. It stretched away in both directions, dimly lit, featureless and uninformative. In the absence of any more positive indications Spock turned in the direction of the sound of which, since waking, he had been subliminally aware, a rhythmic beat, so low in his auditory range as to register less as a sound than as a vibration through the living rock.

The first corridor intersected with a second and then a third, each identical to the one preceding it, the walls rough-hewn and unbroken by doors or stairways, confirming Spock's initial hypothesis that this was indeed part of a mine. Ahead, the corridor curved, light flooded into it from one side and the volume of sound increased to a level where, for the first time, it became recognisable as the grinding clamour of machinery. Spock checked his pace and advanced more cautiously, drawn like a moth towards the golden light. He turned the corner of the corridor and stopped. Had he been Human he might have whistled; as it was both eyebrows climbed towards his hairline.

The light originated from arc lamps set high in the roof of a vast cavern, which illuminated the scene below with the brilliant unreality of a stage set. Possibly natural in its origins, the walls of the cavern now showed loops and ripples where the rock had been melted and vaporised to enlarge it still further. Most of the visible floor area was covered by a mass of plant and machinery, a labyrinth of blocky shapes, engine housings and ducting, the noise of which had first attracted his attention. Above it all, mounted like a watchtower, was a square, boxy, office-type structure with an unimpeded view of the working area and accessed by a curving ramp.

Spock checked that his own position, shielded in part by the machinery and shadowed by the roof of the tunnel, was not immediately visible to anyone in the tower, and fascinated, looked closer. Almost in passing his technician's eye identified the equipment as some kind of ore processing plant, but the nature of the product eluded him. There were men tending the machines, walking skeletons moving with the disjointed indifference of automata. Their pain and exhaustion jangled at his mental barriers even from a distance. And then he saw the pens. Row upon row of wire mesh enclosures stretching away into the dimness, each with its complement of crushed and defeated Humanity, sitting, standing, lying packed together with less consideration than would have been given to brute beasts. The stench reached him where he stood. He had located the missing colonists.

Spock hesitated, for the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one, and their need cried out to him with almost physical force. He took one step forward and then another, before logic reasserted itself. He was unlikely to be able to release more than a handful of colonists before being discovered, but even if he should succeed in freeing all of them even a

numerically superior unarmed force would be defeated by a small group of crack Klingon troops. Wiser by far to try to try to reach the Enterprise, and then to effect a rescue. Leaving his vantage point he began to back cautiously away.

However careful, his movement where no movement should have been betrayed him. One of the slaves raised his head. For a moment he gazed uncomprehendingly, then his eyes focussed with intelligence and recognition dawning in them, and he started to move, not with his previous shambling gait but with real purpose.

Trapped and helpless, Spock did the only thing possible; he raised his finger to his lips in the universal injunction to silence. The man paused and almost imperceptibly nodded, lowering his head to his work once more. He gave no further acknowledgement of Spock's presence, moving along the bank of machines, checking dials and adjusting switches, but the defeated slump had lifted from his shoulders and he moved with the confidence of one for whom hope had been reborn.

The entire pantomime had escaped the notice of the guard, but in those few seconds Spock realised that, whatever logic might dictate, he could not leave. If his sojourn among Humans had taught him anything it was that, however illogical it might be, to die in hope is often better than living in despair. Even without calculation he knew that the odds were heavily against his being able to find his way to the surface and return with help. Therefore he would do everything in his power to free as many of the colonists as he could, and give them what Jim Kirk would call a fighting chance for life. Resolved in his own mind, Spock flattened himself into the slight shadows along the cold and gritty wall and edged closer to reassess the situation.

There were guards in charge of the workers, but their attention was clearly not on their duties, judging by the frequency with which they glanced across the cavern. Following the direction of their looks Spock could see a second, larger troop of Klingons waiting by a heavy-duty ore transporter hitched to a team of wagons which appeared to be doubling up as a troop transport. They stood or sat in small groups, some leaning against the wagons, some sprawled out with their backs resting comfortably against the wheels; two were even playing a game which from a distance looked to be a compromise between knucklebones and dice. All were fully armed. Occasionally one would hitch his blaster rifle higher onto his shoulder as though irritated by delay.

There was little Spock could do about the guards in charge of the colonists, and this group posed by far the greatest threat. If he could arrange a diversion to distract them he would have a reasonable chance of reaching the pens. What happened after that would be a matter of the conjunction of favourable random factors. He had neither the time nor the equipment for anything very sophisticated in the way of a diversion, and every second's delay increased the chances of discovery. Hefting his captured blaster, Spock examined it more closely. It had a similar overload mechanism to a standard issue phaser, which when engaged would effectively transform it into a powerful hand grenade. Left by the troop transport it would explode with sufficient force to eliminate several of the Klingons, and certainly divert all attention - at least temporarily - from the cages.

Getting it to the troop transport would be more of a problem. The cavern was brilliantly lit. The first step he took into that light would result in a challenge from the nearby guard. A short distance behind the troop transporter another entrance to the cavern yawned darkly. Thoughtfully Spock stepped back from his own entrance and considered the curve of the main tunnel as it stretched away into the distance. It appeared that the builders of the cavern complex had been logical and helpful in their thinking. Recognising the possible need to move goods from one part of the cavern to another without crossing the main floor area, they had constructed a circular tunnel which ringed the main chamber and gave access to it, not unlike the warren of tunnels

surrounding the main arena in a Roman colosseum.

Surprisingly, Spock negotiated the curve of the tunnel undetected, although he was conscious of a certain tension due to the increased release of adrenalin into his system by the time he found himself standing in the shadowy entrance behind the vehicles. From this angle the sides of the wagons rose high enough to mask him from the view of the waiting troopers.

Dropping flat to the floor Spock crossed to the transporter with the lethal silence of a hunting le-matya. In spite of the background clangour of the machines, voices drifted clearly to him from the other side of the wagon against which he crouched, mingled with the scuff of feet and the rattle of dice.

"I still say there is no honour to be had by attacking like hvaal out of the darkness. They will be dead before we even reach the battle, held back in reserve like green boys, untried warriors." The voice was charged with the confidence of youth and Klingon arrogance in full measure.

"That may be so, but you may live longer to enjoy what honour you have gained." The second voice carried the certainty that is born of hard experience, tinged with the faintest trace of amusement. "The generals tell us Kirk is soft, but they lie. He is a warrior, that one. He'll fight like a trapped thrai whatever the odds."

The rejoinder was lost to Spock. Crouched down against the unyielding cold of the metal wheel, he was conscious of a sudden vacuity in the pit of his stomach. His throat contracted and he swallowed convulsively. Jim Kirk was nearby with a landing party, and, apparently unsuspecting, was about to walk blindly into an ambush. Spock considered briefly. Logically there was no conflict of interest between personal inclination and his duty to the colonists. If he could but reach his shipmates, the chances of effecting a successful rescue of the prisoners would be increased immeasurably if supported by a fully armed landing party. The immediate problem lay in finding Kirk and springing the trap.

A shout interrupted his train of thought. Spock peered cautiously between the wheels and saw a Klingon officer striding towards the group, light glinting on the gold of his sash. He snapped an order, the first phrase blurred by distance and the clatter of machinery, and as for the rest, Spock's universal translator made little sense of idiomatic Klingonaase. The result, however, was unmistakeable. There was a flurry of activity as the Klingons scrambled hastily to their feet. A further command and they began climbing into the trucks.

Pressed flat to the ground, Spock expected to be noticed at any moment, but there was too much pushing, shoving and general adjustment going on for any of them to look further than where his neighbour was putting his feet.

In view of their sudden departure it was logical to suppose that these troops were about to be used in the engagement against Kirk. As the wheels turning slowly past his face picked up speed Spock gathered his legs under him and made a flying leap for the end carriage. His outstretched hands caught the rim of the truck, while his feet found a purchase on the shock absorbers projecting below. It took Vulcan muscle to hold him in place on his lurching, swaying perch as the troop transporter hurtled through the dimly lit tunnels, its searchlight cutting a swathe through the dusk ahead.

Spock estimated that they had travelled something upwards of a mile when the vehicle began to slow. He allowed himself to drop, rolled to absorb the impact and regained his feet in time to see the transporter stop in the tunnel ahead. Suddenly light flared into the tunnel like a supernova, brilliant and deadly, and with it came the sounds of battle, the whine of phasers, the sharper answering cough of a blaster. Spock saw the Klingons, chunky in silhouette, leap from the cars and race forward into the light, to disappear through a great

breach in the tunnel wall, and knew that he came too late.

Light spurted, too, through a crevice in the rock near where he stood and a little way back from where the Klingons had disappeared. His face an emotionless mask, Spock freed his captured blaster from his belt and slipped through the crack to confront the scene below.

CHAPTER XIII

The first wave was down, thanks to the expertise of Sulu's 'ninja' team, who made as short work of the descent of the waterfall as they had of the other obstacles in their path. They fastened ropes allowing the rest of the party to slide rather than abseil down, and now Jim moved forward to watch the second group descend.

Light blazed out incandescent. A man screamed, and the world went black.

Jim clawed off his helmet and flung it aside, the light cells burned out. He blinked and through streaming eyes saw a figure lose its hold on the rope and fall, flaming like Lucifer cast out, to bounce limply on the rocks.

Like a backdrop curtain suddenly shaken, the cavern wall behind the tumbled boulders shuddered and cleared to reveal a gaping hole, raw as a new wound, blasted through it into the mine. Nor did Kirk need McCoy's horrified "Jim, look!" to see the troop of Klingons pouring through it.

"That damned tunnel wasn't a dead end, they had a cloaking device!" Kirk swore and glanced around. "Chekov!" he yelled above the din. "Take charge up here!" He raced for the lip of the waterfall and sensed rather than saw McCoy follow him.

Jim went down the rope like a bead on a string and landed rolling. The mass of the Enterprise party were here. Mandala Flynn's hair blazed bright as the arc lights as she bobbed up and ducked, making every shot count. He searched for Sulu and caught a quick glimpse of him close by, pulling a man down into cover. To attempt to retreat to the top of the waterfall would be inviting a wholesale slaughter. Any plan of action would just have to take their present position as a starting point.

"Take cover!" Jim roared above the bedlam, and swiftly followed his own advice as a blaster beam singed his hair. He fetched up behind some rocks beside the body of the fallen man, and realised with a sharp twist of grief that it was Carter. For a moment he thought the Security man was dead, then he saw Carter's eyes watching him.

"Boss lady'll have my ears for this," the young man whispered.

Jim shook his head, hardly trusting his voice. "Not unless she takes mine first. My responsibility."

The young Australian's wink and grin were mere travesties of the originals. "With respect, sir, I'm the professional. I should have known."

A plasma bolt wailed like the banshee, Jim ducked as rock splinters flew, and when he looked again the eyes were empty. Carter was gone.

The surprise element was in the Klingons' favour. Some went down to the Enterprise crew's guns, but by the time the Enterprise people had rid themselves of their now useless helmets, the majority of them were safely deployed amongst the rocks from whence they set up a withering barrage of fire, offering very few targets in return and further protected by the deep shadows of the floodlights. Concealed in the tunnel, masked by a cloaking device, it must have been easy

enough for the Klingons to move down into position and set up the searchlight once he and Carter had finished searching the cavern. No problem calling for reinforcements either, with that gaping breach in the wall to give them access.

Squinting against the intensity of the light and the haze of vaporised rock, Kirk counted fire-power by the blaster flashes and grimly considered possibilities. The Enterprise contingent held the waterfall and the lake behind it, albeit with their backs to the wall. The Klingons held the fall of rocks leading to the entrance of the mining complex, and plainly they weren't going anywhere. Either they were content to whittle the Enterprise group down by superior weight of numbers, or more disturbingly, they were fighting a holding action, simply waiting while a second group advanced on Kirk's people from the rear in a pincer movement.

Our team could do with a little pincer movement too, Jim concluded, and eyed the cleft in the rock above the Klingon position, still faintly visible as a shadow behind the arc lights, and assessed the chances of a successful lightning dash.

"Looks like there's more of them!" McCoy shouted as fire lanced out from just below the cleft.

"If there are they're rotten shots!" Sulu called back. "He's just shot one of his own men!"

They looked in disbelief as another Klingon screamed and fell forward. Realisation flooded over Kirk.

"That isn't Klingons!" he yelled. "It's... *Spock!*" The last word came as a cry of warning as he saw the blue-clad figure jerked to its feet by the impact of a shot, then spin round and disappear from view.

"Stay here!" he snapped at McCoy and flung himself from cover in a rolling dive which carried him under the first burst of disruptor fire. Coming to his feet he covered the distance like an Olympic sprinter, weaving and ducking while a clinical and detached part of his mind lazily noted the sharp smack of the spent beams hit the solid rock, and the ensuing tang of ozone.

He climbed the rock fall, worming his way round boulders and dodging Klingon fire, vaulted a final barricade of rocks and dropped flat as more fire sizzled over his head, then McCoy pitched head first over the barrier to land in a heap beside him.

Spock sat slumped, white faced, in the corner, his right hand clamped to his left shoulder. Blood pumped steadily between his fingers, spattering the rocky floor, and he breathed in short hard gasps. Kirk's heart lurched sharply. McCoy crawled over to the Vulcan, drawing a Feinberger from his medical kit. Kirk joined them.

"I thought I told you to stay put," he snarled at McCoy.

"Shaddup, Captain sir, and let me get on with m'job."

"What's the damage?"

"I don't know yet. Now go and stop us getting killed until I can find out."

Kirk scooped up his fallen phaser and scrabbled back to the cleft. The Klingons had taken advantage of the temporary lull in fire to better their position. Kirk lined up his sights, squeezed the trigger and had the satisfaction of hearing a scream as an unwary head disappeared abruptly. *That one's for you, Spock,* he thought savagely, and then he was almost too busy to

think at all.

Glints of gold flaring blood red and blue in the reflected light of phaser and disruptor crossfire, moving purposefully among the rocks below, warned Jim that at least two Klingons were carefully working their way towards him. Clearly the Klingon commander had realised that Jim's suicidal dash had effectively turned the tables by placing the Klingons in the crossfire, and that the Enterprise party was no longer a sacrificial lamb but a tiger held insecurely by the very tip of its tail. Silently Jim chose his vantage point, a v-shaped cleft between two rocks, and waited.

Down towards the waterfall, where the battle raged fiercest, a Klingon half rose, seeking a clearer aim, oblivious of the danger. His companion reached to pull him back and Kirk downed them both without hesitation.

Closer to, much closer than before, a head appeared for an instant as one of Kirk's would-be attackers strained to pinpoint his position from his phaser fire. Jim's phaser beam caught him between the eyes, and he collapsed with an expression of faint disbelief.

"My god, Spock!"

Jim spun round at the sound of McCoy's yell, to see a Klingon hanging like a leech from the cave wall, lining up his blaster on the doctor and the injured Vulcan. McCoy hurled himself forward to land solidly on top of Spock, shielding the Vulcan's body with his own and effectively halting Spock's dive for the discarded blaster. Kirk brought his phaser up, but he was slow - too slow. The Klingon raised his blaster carefully, making sure of his shot, and was enveloped in the aura of a phaser fired at extreme range. For a hand-held phaser it was one hell of a shot. For a moment it seemed that the power would not be enough, then the Klingon relaxed his hold and described a long slow parabola to land out of sight somewhere among the rocks.

Kirk released a breath he had not realised he had been holding and felt his heart race. He looked over towards the source of the shot and saw Sulu unfold himself from behind the boulder he had used to steady his arm. Sulu must have seen Jim's movement if not his expression, and responded with a cheery wave. Jim made a mental note to add marksmanship to the list of commendations that Sulu was rapidly accruing and turned hastily back to the cleft, acutely aware of the use to which the second Klingon must have put this diversion.

A careful inspection revealed no sign of movement closer than the main conflict some fifty yards away. Jim grinned mirthlessly. Not by so much as a flicker did his opponent betray his presence, but he was there, Jim could sense it in the prickle of anticipation across his own skin. McCoy started to say something, but Spock quieted him with an upraised hand, and the three of them waited in silence.

Still crouching, Jim sidled away from his original position, wondering briefly whether his opponent might decide to end the whole matter with a well placed sonic grenade before he remembered the unstable condition of the walls and roof. The Klingon was probably no more enthusiastic about being buried alive than he was.

A trickle of dust dribbled down from the rocks and a pebble bounced across the floor. Jim remained motionless. Finally a shadow heaved itself up against the arc lights, shoulder rolling over the barricade. This was no callow youth but a seasoned warrior, untouched by the battle blindness that transformed so many Klingons into hate-driven berserkers. He saw Kirk's phaser trained on him as he landed and knew his mistake, but there was no trace of rancour in his face as he fell.

Jim stepped past his body to the barricade. Three more Klingons fell to

his phaser, but the weight of opposition was diminishing until finally resistance was confined to one small area in the rocks near the waterfall. The Klingon commander and his bodyguard, Jim guessed. He held his fire and saw Sulu lift a hand to check his people. They waited.

Slowly the Klingon commander rose to his feet, blaster in hand.

"Kirk!" he called across the waiting silence.

"I'm here," Jim replied.

"Kirk, I salute you. You are a warrior worthy of my knife. One day we will both serve in the Black Fleet and even there we shall hunt each other. It will be glorious!"

His shout of laughter was a challenge. He raised the blaster. Sulu began a movement which he never finished. There was a burst of actinic red light, brilliant and blinding, and the Klingon was no more than an after-image seared on the retina. Two more flares followed quickly as the bodyguard joined their Captain and silence fell absolute, intensified rather than diminished by the rush of water as the Enterprise crew paid wordless tribute to their courage.

"Cease fire!" Jim called, and heard Sulu answer him like an echo.

"Cease fire!"

Slowly, stiffly, in two and threes, the Enterprise people got painfully to their feet and looked around, slightly dazed, as though not able to believe that it was over and they were still alive. Jim turned back to his friends. Spock was already standing and McCoy was hauling himself upright, brushing grit from his wetsuit and complaining bitterly.

"I didn't expect thanks, that wouldn't be logical, but you could at least admit that I tried to save your hide."

"Doctor." Spock's voice was patient. "The only thing I feel compelled to admit is the fact that had you not immobilised me at the vital moment, such dramatic intervention would have been wholly unnecessary."

"Well I like that! You ungrateful, pointy-eared..."

Jim chuckled. Reassuringly, some things never changed.

"Jim!"

Spock's warning shout rang in his ears and his mind and sent him round in a slamming turn which carried him under the upraised knife of Sulu's erstwhile victim as he leaped from the top of the barricade towards the Enterprise men. Moving instinctively Jim stepped forwards, grabbed the front of the Klingon's tunic, then dropped backwards using his weight to pull the Klingon off balance towards him. As his back hit the ground he brought his foot up and heaved. He heard the grunt as his boot connected with his opponent's solar plexus. The Klingon hurtled over his head and collided with the wall beyond.

Hastily Jim scrambled to his feet. The Klingon was already rising, shaking his head to clear it. He had lost both his knife and his temper in the fall, and plainly wasn't thinking too clearly. Jim sidestepped as he put his head down and charged. From the tail of his eye Jim could see Spock manoeuvring to get a clear shot, but there was no time to get out of the way. The Klingon bounced off the wall and came back at him, fast and dangerous as a mad bull. Jim took two steps and sprang, aiming for a flying kick to the breastbone. He felt his foot seized in mid air then twisted. He twisted with it to avoid a broken leg and crashed down onto hands and one knee, the other leg stretched out

painfully behind him. He rolled over blindly and the Klingon was on top of him, powerful hands at his throat, squeezing, choking. Desperately Jim drove his head into the maddened face so close to his own. Bone burst and he felt blood spatter down into his eyes. The grip on his throat slackened. Jim slammed a punch into the mutilated face. The Klingon reared back, Jim followed with a second punch, the Klingon slumped to the floor. Grabbing a handful of tunic Jim delivered the coup de grace and his assailant fell back unconscious.

"Captain, are you all right?"

Kirk straightened painfully to find Spock watching him with an expression which could only be termed concerned.

"I'll live - I think." He wiped the blood from his face and cautiously flexed a badly bruised knee. "How about you?"

"Hide like a rhino," McCoy interjected. "He won't feel like weight lifting for a couple of days; after that he'll be fine." The doctor gathered up his medical kit and moved towards a group gathered further down the rockfall.

"You said that without moving your lips," Kirk said as lightly as he could, whilst his eyes absorbed the reality of his friend standing before him, pale and battered but indisputably alive, and found himself grinning like an idiot. He saw the corners of Spock's mouth lift fractionally in response.

"Jim!"

Kirk heard the urgency in the doctor's voice, saw him kneeling by something crumpled on the ground, and knew with a terrible prescience that they were not yet finished with grief. Human and Vulcan raced towards their friend, and Kirk dropped on his knees beside him.

Marrin's breathing rasped harshly, smoking in the cold air, and her eyes were closed; sensing his presence they flickered open and she smiled at him. Her lovely face was untouched; he avoided looking at the horror below. Instead he answered the smile, and trusting as a child her fingers curled around his hand. He glanced up at McCoy, who shook his head.

"I told you I could rest when this was over," she said softly. "But I didn't intend it to be for quite so long." Cold fingers against his lips silenced his own inarticulate sound of denial.

"Hush, Jim," she said, as though it was he and not she who was in need of comfort. "It was nobody's fault. I should have realised he'd tell them. I have no regrets. Well, only one - that I shan't be there to see you bring them home."

Her gaze wandered past him as though beguiled by something only she could see in the darkness beyond, and she sighed. After a moment McCoy reached over to close the clear grey eyes.

Kirk climbed stiffly to his feet. He felt drained and suddenly very cold. Somehow he dredged up the energy to speak, and like an actor monitored the amount of strength and confidence he put into his voice as he said, "Mr. Sulu, report."

The Helmsman's voice was steady, but his face was wet. "We made it, sir. We lost Carter and Roberts and of course..." He left the sentence hanging.

Casualties were light, Kirk thought. Except casualties are never light. He became aware of McCoy beside him and grief transmuted to anger.

"I suppose you still think she should have come with us?" He knew that he

was being unjust, and at the precise moment he didn't care.

"I still think a lot more people might have died if she hadn't."

"And the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one?" His voice was bitter. "Do you of all people really believe that?"

"No, but she did. Don't waste it, Jim."

And his anger was gone, burned up and blown away like ashes.

"Sorry, Bones, I had no right to say that. It's just that sometimes I feel I spend my life finding good causes for other people to die for."

McCoy's single nod of acceptance told him that the doctor understood, and that his outburst had not even smudged the edges of their friendship.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" He turned to the Vulcan waiting quietly beside him. There was a note of urgency in the usually even tones.

"I believe I have discovered the missing colonists."

"Where?"

"They are located approximately one mile from here. They are being used as forced labour in what appears to be an ore processing plant, under the control of an old adversary - Captain Kereth. I saw him at Marciana, the night of my abduction."

"That figures." Kirk's quick grin contained more than a hint of wolf. "How many men would you say he has guarding them?"

Spock looked round thoughtfully at the litter of unconscious bodies surrounding them. "I would estimate that this constitutes at least three quarters of his force. I believe he may have placed his reliance on intercepting you, and has retained only sufficient guards to maintain control over the colonists."

"Instead of which we've intercepted the interceptors. I don't think any of them managed to escape, so it's going to take Kereth a while to realise that we're still alive. The element of surprise is still with us. With luck, the first he'll know of it will be when we free the colonists, provided we get moving."

They got moving.

There was a short pause to gather up fallen equipment. Fallen comrades were laid out decently before the group formed a column and moved out through the breach in the wall.

McCoy eyed the abandoned troop carrier wistfully. "It'd be quicker and easier to carry the wounded if we used this thing," he said, trying carefully to avoid looking directly at Spock.

"Sorry, Bones. No can do. The noise of the engine would tell every Klingon between here and the processing planet that we're on our way. We'll take it as easy as possible, but if they do find out a whole lot more people are likely to get hurt."

Even so, Kirk felt a twinge of guilt as he raced down the tunnel and cast a covert glance in Spock's direction. The Vulcan's face wore its customary closed

expression, but he moved without undue difficulty. However, Jim was very much aware that there were others within the group who had sustained flesh wounds and minor injuries and who now ran, supported by their comrades, making the best speed that they could, as conscious as he of time pressing hard upon their heels.

The tunnel they were following connected with another lit by tritium lights and the Enterprise people were able to remove their helmets, grateful for the unrestricted vision and the rush of cool air against sweat-damp faces. Within a few hundred yards Spock slacked his pace and shortly thereafter the rest of the party were able to see and hear where light and sound spilled out into the corridor.

Kirk raised a hand to bring his party to a halt and gloomily surveyed the corridor curving away in both directions. Two blind corners around which the Klingons could come at any moment, giving them precious little warning and not a shred of cover. Oh well, nobody said life had to be easy.

"Spock, Sulu, with me. Bones, stay here and do what you can to help the wounded. Mr. Chekov, I want you to post guards on both those corners and if anything comes round them apart from us, for once you have my full permission to shoot first and ask questions later. The rest of you stay here."

There was a general settling as people swung packs to the ground. Many sank down with obvious relief, to sit, backs propped against the walls. Some, Jim could see, were hurt and nearing the end of their strength. Spock and Sulu joined him and together they advanced cautiously until they could look out across the width of the cavern.

Silently Jim noted the processing plant, the watchtower and the slow and regular pacing of the solitary guard. Standing to one side, Spock saw his Captain's lips thin, and sensed without touch his anger and revulsion as his eyes ranged over the pens, but Kirk made no comment beyond a murmured, "They've been careless; there's only one guard down there."

Up in the watchtower a figure crossed and recrossed the lighted rectangle of the window, pacing restlessly, his uniform sash glinting with every turn. Spock's eyes narrowed.

"Captain Kereth, I believe," he said softly after a few moments.

"Yeah," Kirk agreed. "He's been expecting the triumphant return of his attack force, and now he's starting to get very worried."

A Klingon emerged from the watchtower, descended to the ramp and crossed the floor towards them. The guard halted his pacing and the two spoke for some time. Eventually the newcomer shrugged, eloquently non-committal, and returned from whence he had come. The guard resumed his patrol.

Kirk had watched the exchange in silence. Now he said, "I reckon our time's running out. Any time now Kereth will panic and sound the alarm, and then we'll have a real fight on our hands. Sulu, where's that tricorder? Spock, can you spike those damned warble circuits and take a reading? I want to know the strength of the opposition."

There was a short pause while Spock fiddled with the instrument and a slightly shorter one while it whirred with muted purpose. Eventually the Vulcan said,

"There appear to be 22 Klingons in the immediate vicinity. The guard we can see, two more behind the plant over to our right, and the rest in the watchtower above, together with someone else." He frowned slightly at the display. "The reading looks almost Human, but there are definite

discrepancies."

"Possibly one of the colonists," Kirk suggested. "Anyway, those sound like pretty favourable odds to me, Mr. Spock. Now unless I miss my guess, that entrance on the far side over there connects with the corridor we've just come from."

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Good. Mr. Sulu, take half the party and work your way round to that entrance. We'll give you three minutes to get into position and then we'll start a diversion - something big and flashy with lots of phaser fire. Don't worry about what's going on over here - just get to the pens and get them open. The Klingons will probably try to stop you, but the colonists stand a better chance out in the open than locked in those cages in the middle of a pitched battle. When you've done that, get them away, up to the surface. The rest of us will follow when we can. I mean it, Mr. Sulu - they're your responsibility."

They turned back towards the group and the inevitable happened. The intruder alert whooped above the sound of the machines. Jim clapped a hand to the Helmsman's shoulder.

"Go, Mr. Sulu!"

Sulu went through the party like a hot knife through butter, tapping people on the arm and indicating that they should follow. Within seconds he disappeared down the tunnel, his team racing behind him. Jim signalled to his own group and they sprinted for the entrance, fanning out seeking cover.

The Klingons were streaming from the guard house down the ramp, leaping from the sides of it to the ground as the first blue phaser fire splashed across the walls. Jim saw Sulu's group appear in the other entry, then duck quickly as blaster fire whined over their heads. They tried again, but were effectively pinned down.

"There's Kereth!" McCoy shouted, pointing to a Klingon in officer's dress who, heedless of the whiplash of crossfire, leaned over the gantry to direct his troops below. The Klingon's words were lost in the turmoil, but not the result. Jim glimpsed a sudden burst of movement as two figures obediently leapt to their feet and set off, running.

"Shit and damn! They're headed for the pens. It'll be a massacre!"

Cases and machinery hampered his vision. That one thought in his mind, he leaped to his feet, crouching to take two-handed, precise aim at the fleeing figures. The solid weight of Vulcan muscle and bone caught him squarely amidships, bearing him to the ground. Furious, Kirk twisted round in the Vulcan's grasp.

"Do you realise what you've just done? You just stopped me..." he began, and caught sight of the gaping hole blasted in the wall behind where his head would have been. "... getting myself killed," he finished lamely.

"Eminently logical, Mr. Spock," McCoy said dryly as Captain and First Officer disentangled themselves.

"And one still doesn't thank logic?" Kirk added in a tone that was half query, half unspoken apology.

"No indeed, Captain," Spock replied solemnly, but his eyes smiled acceptance.

"Well thank pitchforks and pointed ears, then!" McCoy exclaimed,

exasperated. "But come on!"

The two Klingons had reached the pens unchecked, but instead of laying waste they began to run along the row unbolting the gates, flinging them wide, and finally stood back as the colonists began to shuffle through. Mystified, the Enterprise crew watched as gradually the ones and twos became a steady stream and then a flood of close-packed Humanity moving silently towards them.

"They're surrendering," someone said. Phasers were lowered.

Other colonists, working the machinery, stepped in from each side to join the crowd. Ensign Hammond stepped out from behind a crate where Sulu's group were gathered, holding out a hand. With unspeaking and dispassionate ease the colonist swung his shovel. Hammond's face disappeared in a bright mask of blood.

To Jim it seemed as though it broke the spell that held him in thrall with all the rest.

"Fall back!" he yelled. "Phasers on stun! Fire at will!"

* * * * *

Sulu raced along the corridor, Chekov and Mandala Flynn pacing him, the rest strung out behind, the intruder alert whooping in time to their racing feet.

"What now?" Chekov demanded, a trifle breathlessly.

"We're to get the colonists out and away," Sulu answered with considerably more confidence than he felt.

"We'll have to move quickly," Flynn said. "That's an awful lot of people to move, and if the Captain's group can't hold the Klingons back, we'll be dancing a lobster quadrille with the Klingons close behind us and treading on our tails."

They halted just inside the entrance to the cavern. Flynn drew her phaser, flattened herself to the wall and glided forward. Sulu signalled to the rest of the party to wait and mirrored her action against the opposite wall, inching his way forward, Chekov just behind him.

"With any luck..." he murmured half to himself, and got no further.

Mandala Flynn hurled herself back, half rolling against the stone, blaster fire spraying along the wall behind her. The final burst caught her like a whiplash across her back and arm, and Sulu caught her as she staggered and nearly fell. Chekov reached out to help, then sprang past them, drawing his phaser as he went. Beyond him Sulu caught a glimpse of two Klingons sprinting towards the cages. Chekov took two-handed aim and snapped off a quick shot at the leader before blaster fire drove him back. Taken in haste, the shot went wide of its mark; the Klingon staggered, but carried on running.

Flynn shoved at Sulu with her good hand. "I'm all right. Go and help him."

He lowered her gently to the ground and ran forward, signalling to the rest of the team to follow.

"Spread out and take cover!" he yelled above the bedlam, and they scattered, rolling and diving for the scant cover of crates and abandoned machinery.

"Get ready to cover me!" he called to the nearest of the group, and gathered himself to try to reach the cages. However low his chances of survival, it had been his mistake to let the Klingons get past them, and it was now his responsibility to try to stop them.

"Wait!" somebody shouted, and the firing on both sides suddenly stopped. Somewhere in the background Sulu could hear the exchange of fire with the Captain's group continuing, but like the eye of a hurricane, around his party all was calm.

"What's happening?" someone else demanded, and then they saw the colonists.

Eyes blank and features slack with exhaustion, moving slowly but with increasing confidence, they stepped from between the cages, a trickle of Humanity that rapidly became a tide, flooding out to sweep across the cavern floor.

"They're surrendering?" Chekov voiced it as a question, but others echoed it as a certainty and a ragged cheer went up. Ensign Hammond rose to his feet, his hands held open and empty in a gesture of friendship.

"Get down!" Sulu shouted, but the boy paid no attention.

The leading colonist barely paused to pick up a discarded shovel. The impact of metal on bone was sickening. Hammond dropped without a sound.

Other colonists were arming themselves with tools, pieces of machinery, even with chunks of ore, all still with that same vacant stare, sweeping onward in an irresistible wave that threatened to overwhelm the Enterprise crew and drag them down.

"Phasers on stun!" Sulu roared. "Fire at will!"

As the words left his lips he recognised the futility of them. Colonists were falling to the concerted phaser fire, and as they fell there were more to replace them - hundreds more. He saw two more of his people go down, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of numbers, and saw the beginnings of panic amongst the rest of the crew.

It reminded Sulu vividly of a vintage film he had seen, where the Zulu chieftain Cetawayo flung the full might of his Impi warriors against the tiny force of British soldiers at Rourke's Drift, and with the memory came an idea.

"Fall back!" he shouted.

They obeyed him willingly, gathering in the mouth of the tunnel.

"Form two ranks. Front rank, kneel. Second rank, stand. Fire!"

Their backs protected by the tunnel entrance, the Enterprise crew rallied and began to pour out a barrage of fire, cutting a swathe through the advancing people.

It was a strange, silent and eerie battle. The colonists fell in their hundreds and still they came, obsessed and driven, uttering no sound even when hit, simply clawing and scrambling over the bodies of their fallen comrades to reach the Enterprise men.

The Human tide swept past, but failed to engulf Sulu's group, and advanced on Kirk's party. Sick to his stomach, Jim fired until the fallen bodies mounded up like sandbags and the phaser in his hand tingled its warning of low power against his palm.

Then suddenly, miraculously, there were no more. Jim and his companions looked out across a body-strewn battlefield where nothing moved. There followed a long moment of silence before the barrage of blaster fire from the watchtower began again.

"Jim," McCoy said urgently, "we're going to have to get these people apart before the ones on top suffocate those below, or they all get shot and killed."

"Yes, Doctor," Kirk said tersely, "but not yet. Kereth and his crew still have the drop on us."

As if to emphasise the point, blaster fire laced the floor area.

"We could probably lob a sonic grenade in through that window," Barry al Auriga, Security Second, suggested.

Kirk shook his head. "What happens if it's shatter-proof glass, or if you get shot before you can throw it, or even just plain miss? It'll bounce right back amongst all these people. Sorry, Mr. al Auriga, the answer is no. We came here to avert a massacre, not to cause one. Unless..." He paused thoughtfully.

A second ore transporter, this one with a vast earth shifting scoop at the front of it, stood still hitched to its train of wagons almost at the foot of the ramp up to the tower. Kirk eyed it speculatively and glanced at Spock. The Vulcan nodded agreement.

"Mr. al Auriga," Kirk said, "keep everybody here, then if this works, follow as closely as you can behind. Ready, Spock?"

They went in a quick flurry of movement that gave little opportunity to the snipers, Spock to the controls, and Kirk to work feverishly at the couplings. The coupling dropped free as the engine roared to life. Spock turned the machine and partly raised the scoop to deflect the blaster beams.

Jim made a flying dive for the passenger door as the machine trundled forwards up the ramp, fire bouncing off the scoop in a fountain of sparks. Jim twisted round in the confined space behind Spock and saw Barry al Auriga beckon the group forward to follow the crawler up the ramp, sheltering behind its massive bulk.

The machine lurched suddenly, slamming Jim against the window as one of the tracks left the ramp. A section of the scoop flared like a roman candle and disintegrated in a viscous stream of molten metal. Blaster fire lashed across the windscreen leaving the plasti-steel scorched and smoking.

"Captain," Spock said quietly, "I estimate that the crawler will withstand the present rate of assault for another 1.5 minutes. At our present rate of progress..."

Jim ignored the rest. "Stick with it, Mr. Spock," he said, and reached over to open the passenger door, hooking his undamaged leg around the seat to brace himself and using the door as an impromptu shield. From this somewhat precarious perch he fired a long phaser burst through the gap of the hinge across the nose of the crawler between scoop and windscreen, raking across the front of the watchtower. The chances of actually hitting anyone were fairly remote, but since it was impossible to duck and shoot simultaneously the volume of return fire fell abruptly. The engine howled in protest as the second track sought and found a purchase on the ramp, and the machine ploughed forward once more. Something clattered against the scoop and bounced away. Jim hastily ducked back inside, there was a "Whump!" of detonation, and the crawler bucked like a nervous horse.

"Grenade," Spock commented succinctly by way of explanation as he wrestled

the machine back under control. Something under the dashboard fizzed and sputtered with a burst of sparks and a smell of singing plastic, and the temperature gauge rose alarmingly.

Jim opened his mouth to speak and changed his mind. Nothing he could say would help matters in the slightest, and Spock could do without the distraction. There was a dull crunch as the crawler impacted with the door ahead and stopped. Spock swung the throttle wide. The machine shuddered slightly, gathered itself and surged relentlessly forward, carrying with it the door, the door frame and a large section of the wall as well.

A Klingon, knife in hand, leaped for the door of the crawler. Jim kicked it open straight into the onrushing figure and fired a phaser burst into the open-mouthed startled faces of the Klingons still crouched by the windows. Behind him he heard the whine of Spock's phaser.

Cautiously, Vulcan and Human swung down from the crawler. The rest of the room was empty, the door to the inner office closed. Enterprise crewpeople were squeezing past the bulk of the crawler to take charge of the unconscious Klingons and the groaning knife expert. Spock, phaser drawn, took up position on one side of the closed door. Jim moved to the other. He caught the Vulcan's eye and nodded. Carefully Spock leaned across, twisted the handle and slammed the door open with enough force to bounce it back against the inside wall. Jim dived through, shoulder rolling to avoid the expected burst of blaster fire. He came to his feet, phaser in hand.

"Kirk, no!"

Jim froze, then very carefully he eased his thumb from the firing button and waited. Kereth stood with his left arm hooked around Dr. Taylor's throat, the blunt snout of the blaster in his right hand shoved painfully into the soft skin under the doctor's jaw, forcing his head up and back.

"Kirk, for god's sake, no! He'll kill me!" The scientist's voice was tinged with hysteria.

Kirk stood motionless, weighing, assessing, probing for a weakness to break the deadlock. From the corner of his eye he could see Spock doing the same.

"He's right, Kirk. I beg you to believe him. Throw down your weapon."

Jim let the phaser drop from his fingers, away from him but not too far.

"You too." The blaster gestured once, sharply, in Spock's direction. Jim heard the clatter as the Vulcan obeyed.

"Now call off your dogs, Kirk." Kereth began to edge crabwise along the wall, keeping Taylor always as a shield between himself and the Enterprise men.

Jim started to move his hand towards his communicator, slowly, so that there could be no misinterpretation; slowly, because the way he was moving, Kereth's unprotected shoulder would pass close to Spock. The tableau froze.

A phaser whined behind him. Caught in the nimbus, Kirk felt the strength drain from his limbs; bright lights jigged before his eyes, he staggered against the wall, and for a moment felt the plasterboard cool against his cheek before his vision cleared to show him Kereth, Taylor and Kereth's two guards sprawled in an untidy tangle on the floor, and McCoy, with a medical tricorder in one hand, a phaser in the other, and a slightly sheepish expression.

"Sorry 'bout that, Jim, but there wasn't time to warn you. Kereth wouldn't have killed Taylor whatever happened, because Taylor's a Klingon."

Kirk gaped at him and could find nothing to say. Encouraged, McCoy continued.

"Taylor bothered me, medically speaking, when we first met him, but it wasn't till now, when I could compare the readings, that I was absolutely sure. Taylor isn't a Human who's been raised in the Martian colonies; he's a Klingon who's been surgically altered to pass for Human. I reckon we've been set up," he added disgustedly, looking around at the carnage. "They were expecting us. They've been expecting us all along. Somebody tipped them off."

"They certainly did," Kirk agreed with the conviction of a man who has just heard the missing piece of the jigsaw fall into place with an almost audible click.

"Not Marrin," McCoy stated firmly. "I'd stake my life on it."

"You just did, Doctor," Spock commented.

"No, not Marrin," Jim intervened hastily before McCoy could reply. "Mr. Spock, how do you feel?"

"I am functional."

"Good. There's a cloaking device somewhere round here that's going to make moving people in and out of the mine very difficult. Get onto it, and get rid of it. Mr. Chekov, go with him."

They departed and Jim reached for his communicator, savouring the return to normality and with it the realisation that shortly they could all go home.

There was a thinly disguised note of relief in Scott's voice as Uhura opened the channel that wiped away any trace of complacency and caused Kirk to ask, "How are things up there?"

"Och sir, I think we may have a wee problem. Our shields have just come up. There's a Klingon Bird of Prey just popped onto the screens. He's decloaked, and I think he's painting for war."

"Get the hell out of there, Scotty. Give yourself some space to manoeuvre, then get Uhura to contact that ship and tell him that he'd better think very carefully before he starts anything, because I've got his commanding officer down here, and I'm only looking for a small excuse to blow his brains out. Oh, and you'd better remind him that Captain Kereth is sister-kin to the Emperor, just in case he decides on promotion by double-cross. With any luck that'll sound even nastier in Klingonaase." He grinned reassuringly at the anxious faces gathered around him as he closed the communicator. "Mr. Sulu, see to the tidying up here. Keep a good watch on those prisoners." He indicated the unconscious Kereth. "Bones, stay with him. I'm going to see a man about an ambush."

The feeling of cold anxiety stayed with him as he made his way up through the levels of the mine - anxiety and a sense of frustration that his ship was in danger and there was nothing he could do to help. He moved with due caution, but the upper reaches of the mine were totally deserted. Evidently Spock's surmise that Kereth had shot his bolt by sending the bulk of his troops against them at the waterfall was correct.

Racing towards the first grey traces of daylight, Jim saw the entrance suddenly appear to shiver as though shaking itself and clear to reveal several pre-fab huts and a trio of bulky transport vehicles not apparent before. Clearly the cloaking device had been dealt with.

Outside the wind had risen, gusting sharply, showing the silvery underside

of leaves and driving grey clouds across the sky like tattered pennants. He felt the first spattering of rain against his face as he called the ship. Scott's cheerful voice responded promptly to his urgent query.

"We're fine, sir. Your message worked a treat. After the first exchange of pleasantries all the fight seemed to go out of him. It's so quiet now we're thinking of starting a quilting bee."

"In that case, Mr. Scott, can you lower shields and beam me up? A fleeting visit only, I'm afraid, Scotty. I need to get back to Marciana urgently."

CHAPTER XIII

The rain that was threatening in the hills had fallen in Marciana and the sky, against which the sickle-winged bell birds wheeled and dipped, juggling their twin notes, reflected slate blue in the puddles on the empty piazza.

Jim took the steps to the house two at a time. Here too all seemed deserted. The steady beat of the great clock echoed from the dining room as he crossed the hallway.

Jerom Barkley was working at his comfortably untidy desk as though the past 24 hours had never happened. He looked up frowning at the disturbance as Kirk entered, then his face lit up in a wide grin.

"Jim! Come in and sit down."

He rose to pour drinks and shoved impatiently at the shutter so that sunlight sprang into the room, touching the wine in the tall glasses to warmth and brilliance. There was music playing - Mozart, Kirk's mind supplied automatically. Spock could undoubtedly have identified it precisely. The notes fell with a terrible innocence, proclaiming joy and the rightness of all creation. Jim thought of an old man waiting in vain for his son to return, of a clear-eyed girl dying far from the sunlight, and of this man who had been his friend, and set his glass down untouched.

"You seem surprised to see me, Jerom."

"Delighted, more like - and surprised too. Talk about into the valley of death. The Six Hundred had nothing on you. Well, tell me what happened."

"We met a party of Klingons at the foot of the waterfall."

"My god, it's a miracle you got back at all." He paused thoughtfully. "Someone must have tipped them off. It's the only answer that makes any kind of sense. But who? Marrin?"

"I doubt it. She died in the first attack. Shot in the stomach." Barkley flinched. "No, it was probably Dr. Taylor, our resident Klingon, surgically altered to pass for Human. The real question is, who told him? But I think we both know the answer to that. How many times have you tipped them off, Jerom? When we arrived, certainly, and when we were going up to the geology base. Of course, they'd need a bit of advance warning then. And again last night, when as an old friend and the planetary governor I did you the courtesy of telling you what we were going to do to help your people." His voice shook with anger.

The russet head lifted sharply, the eyes wide with shock. "Jim, what are you saying? We've been friends for years, but even leaving that aside, if I'd sold you out to the Klingons, you don't imagine I'd be sitting here calmly waiting for you to come back?"

Kirk's smile was wintry. "But you weren't expecting me to come back, were

you? I've been thinking quite a lot about you, Jerom, and you don't fit the mould. No wife, no children, no desperate personal reasons to co-operate with the Klingons, yet here you are." He waved a hand, taking in the graceful room. "Oh yes, of course, you told me, you were saving lives. You were saving a great deal more than that, weren't you, Jerom? Pottery from Cestos III, oriental carpets from Earth. Nobody's business interests on a world like this run to that kind of lifestyle. When the Klingons invaded you decided which was going to be the winning side and you've been playing with them ever since, haven't you?"

Barkley dropped his gaze to his folded hands for a moment, then raised his eyes challengingly. "Put like that, I admit it doesn't sound good, but supposing, just for a moment, that farrago of nonsense was true - prove it!"

"I can't," Kirk agreed. "Yet. But I'll bet there'll be some others who'll be willing to help me. Brad McCluskey for one, and Dr. Phillips."

"I expect you could, but you won't need to. It's true. The gist of what I told you is also true." He shrugged. "The rest of it just happened. I can still help you, Jim. Kereth's ship is on its way."

"And is at present in orbit under the Enterprise's phasers."

"Give me a break, Jim, for old time's sake. Let me leave with her."

"I'm almost tempted to do it. A man turned traitor to his own people, who then sells the Empire out in favour of the people he betrayed in the first place - I reckon what they'd do to you would be about what you deserve."

Barkley shrugged again. "There's no alternative."

Jim started to move as Barkley's hands swept aimlessly amongst the scattered papers and fetched up short in front of the desk under the cold eye of the phaser which appeared in Barkley's hand.

"I'm sorry, Jim," Barkley's smile held a particular sweetness, "but it looks as though I'm going to have to kill you." He pushed back his chair, rose and stepped back. His foot tangled in the chair base and for a second his concentration broke.

Kirk set both hands on the desk top and vaulted. One foot connected with Barkley's wrist hard enough to snap bone. The phaser arced away and skittered across the floor. The other foot caught Barkley squarely in the chest. He slammed back into the wall and rebounded. Jim landed staggering, caught his balance and followed up with a punch that sent Barkley reeling backwards into the cabinet. Glass and china clashed and shattered. One flailing hand, scrabbling for balance at the ornate shelves, hooked around a bronze figure and suddenly Barkley was coming back at Kirk, swinging the statue like a bludgeon.

Jim backed quickly, pulling his own phaser clear. The phaser, he realised bitterly as his palm tingled with its warning, that he had expended in the fight and had forgotten to exchange aboard the Enterprise. He flung it at Barkley's head and gave ground again, feinting as the other man advanced; one step, two steps, and his damaged knee gave way. He jerked aside and Barkley brought the full weight of statue and plinth down on his shoulder. The collar bone snapped like matchwood, the world went dark, and they went down together in a sprawl of limbs.

Kirk's left arm was useless and he fought by instinct, trying to bring his knees up to kick the other man away. Vision returned and he realised that Barkley was pinning him down to reach across him over his head to the phaser. Jim strained desperately and they rolled away. Baulked of his original intent, Barkley shifted his grip to Kirk's throat, pressing relentlessly. One handed,

Jim tried to block him but could get no leverage. Barkley was wiry-strong and Kirk could feel his own strength ebbing.

A sudden impact jarred through his arms and something hard and brittle scattered about his head. He felt the sharp sting as a fragment grazed his neck and Barkley slumped limply on top of him.

Gradually his sight cleared, to reveal Khoor standing over him, the shattered remains of a Tzai-chen temple vase in one hand. Jim gazed down at the limp figure sprawled on his chest, then up at the Klingon.

"Hoist with his own petard," he said reflectively.

A fleeting smile touched the dark, saturnine face. "Or at least, felled with his own vase," the Klingon amended. Khoor bent to release him from the imprisoning weight, then reached down a hand to help him to his feet.

"I owe you an apology," Jim said. "I thought you were involved."

"I know what you thought, Captain. It's what everybody always thinks. I am not responsible for my antecedents, but whatever my appearance may suggest, I am Leonardan to the bone."

"If you knew what was happening, why didn't you say something?"

"They would have killed my wife and children," Khoor replied with quiet dignity.

Jim nodded silently, aware of the injustice of his assumptions.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, and a moment later Spock appeared, dignified and unruffled as ever, and probably only Jim would have known that he had been hurrying. The Vulcan halted just inside the door, taking in the devastation around him, encompassing his Captain, the Klingon and the body on the floor. Jim grinned back unabashed. He knew what he must look like. His shirt was torn, his left arm dangled limp and useless by his side, and when he licked the corner of his mouth he tasted blood.

For a long moment Spock continued to survey the scene in silence, then the smile which had begun in his eyes moved down to curve the corners of his mouth, and one eyebrow rose. "A satisfactory conclusion, Captain?"

"Eminently satisfactory, thank you, Mr. Spock."

* * * * *

The fight with Barkley signalled not an end, but the beginning of a hectic few days for the crew of the Enterprise, starting for Jim with a trip to sickbay, where his broken collar bone was regenerated by Nurse Tamura, the most junior of McCoy's medical staff. She was efficient and apologetic. Just about everybody, she explained, had beamed down to the planet to help the colonists. Kirk in his turn was keen to get away, and therefore co-operative to such an extent that Tamura was left slightly bemused and wholly convinced that McCoy's complaints about the Captain as a patient were groundless.

"I can give you about two minutes, Jim," McCoy said when Kirk finally tracked him down to the small room in Marciana's hospital that had been turned over to him as an office. "Thau and I have a hell of a lot of work to get through."

"That's okay, Bones. I only have one real question. Have you any leads yet on what caused the colonists to attack us?"

"Oh, that's straightforward enough. Here, take a look at this." He reached into a small dish on his desk and tipped a minute object onto the palm of Kirk's hand. "Such a tiny thing to cause so much anguish," he added.

"I'd be more impressed if I knew what it was," Kirk said.

"The niftiest, nastiest mind control device I've never had the pleasure to meet. As far as I can tell, all the colonists in the mines have them. They're inserted here," he tapped the back of his neck, "in the nerve centre at the base of the skull. Tune them in to a particular frequency, transmit the right message, and bingo, the victim retains full consciousness but someone else is pulling the strings. They even manage to overcome the victim's awareness that they're there, so even if they had the ability to take them out, they wouldn't see the need."

"Ugh!" Jim said, handing it back.

"Quite. Fortunately there don't seem to be any long term effects. The guy I took this one out of woke up twenty minutes later and started asking about his wife and kids, so I guess we can count our blessings. We're keeping the rest of the colonists sedated until we can treat them, and the theatre teams will be submitting their claims for overtime pay in due course."

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The bodies of the dead crewmembers were retrieved from the cave system and the mines to be returned to their home planets or buried in space, according to the instructions they had left. Jim made a point of being in the transporter room when the coffins were beamed aboard, each draped with the flag of the Federation. He also made a point of going to see Marrin. She had no surviving relatives on the planet, and arrangements had been made to return her body to her remaining family on Earth. Jim stood for a long time looking down at the still figure lit by the glowing blue of the stasis light. Her spirit had lent substance to her body, and with her silver-bright vitality quenched Jim could only think how small and fragile she looked. For himself, he felt only a kind of numbness. His grief was locked away too deep inside him, and he could not cry.

For the next three days Kirk continued to see his officers only in passing. Spock, who was adamant about resuming his duties, looked pale and was, if possible, even more reticent than usual, but otherwise seemed to have suffered no permanent damage. However, when he reappeared on the bridge and quietly resumed his customary place, Kirk gave him a searching look which the Vulcan returned blandly.

"Are you certain you ought to be up here? Shouldn't you be in sickbay and give McCoy a chance to do something with that shoulder?"

"I can assure you, Captain, that healing is in progress and at present Dr. McCoy's staff have more than sufficient patients upon whom to practice their limited medical skills."

There was a snort of laughter from Uhura, tactfully converted to a cough, and Jim felt his own lips twitch in sympathy.

"In that case," he said, "there's a meeting for department heads in Briefing Room One in ten minutes. I'd welcome any input from you."

* * * * *

"Well, Jim," McCoy said, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair, "I reckon we've just about finished here. We've removed the mind control units from the colonists, all one thousand two hundred and thirty-seven of 'em.

They're confused and a little disorientated, which is understandable, but my people are running checks to make sure there are no long-term problems."

"What about Barkley?"

"Very little I can do there, I'm afraid, Jim. He's quite sane and healthy, no mitigating circumstances that I can find, just a nasty attack of greed. Like you said, the Klingons seemed as though they were there to stay, and he thought he might as well be on the winning side."

Kirk sighed. "Okay. Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. We've repaired what damage there was from our first wee dust-up wi' Kereth's ship - none of it serious, and I've checked the engines and systems over. She's ready any time you want her."

"Good. Mr. Spock? Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan refocussed his abstracted gaze on his Captain. "I have entered the data from Dr. Endicott's survey into the computer. Barratt, from Geology, has completed a complementary survey. It is not fully comprehensive, but it may be of some assistance to Starfleet when debating this problem."

"Thank you, gentlemen. For my own part, as you know I have been spending quite a lot of time with the remaining councillors. I think they're all still more than a little stunned by the speed of events, but Starfleet is sending a team of advisors to help them pick up the pieces and re-establish the council. I think they could do worse than offer Khoor a place on it. I don't think there's any real need to worry. They're the descendants of pioneers - it'll take more than a few Klingons to get them down."

"Pardon me, sir, but talking of Klingons..."

"Yes, Mr. Scott?"

"What's to be done wi' those heathen devils, sir?"

Kirk met his Chief Engineer's gaze squarely. "Nothing at all, Scotty. Starfleet in its infinite wisdom thinks that any attempt at retribution would probably provoke a 'diplomatic incident' likely to escalate into a full-scale war, and we daren't take that chance. No, we're to escort them to the edge of the Neutral Zone and turn them loose."

"Aye, well there's no accounting for taste. Could we no' speed their departure a little wi' a photon torpedo or two?"

Kirk chuckled. "Don't tempt me, Scotty." Then he sobered. "Kereth's pride has taken a beating, which is probably a worse punishment."

CHAPTER XIV

And so it was finally over. The Enterprise had escorted Kereth's ship to the edge of the Neutral Zone and watched her slip quietly away. Her departure signalled a return to normality for the crew of the Enterprise.

This is where we came in. Business as usual during alterations, Kirk thought wryly. Out loud he said, "Mr. Chekov, plot us a course for standard patrol."

"Aye aye, Keptin."

Kirk glanced around him, drawing comfort from the quietly purposeful

activity around him. Another problem solved, another potentially explosive situation defused. He reached for a feeling of satisfaction, but it wouldn't come. He felt depressed.

Rationally he knew it was the aftermath of action. In the rush of combat there was no time to think, to reflect, but now it crowded in on him: the weariness; the disillusionment; the deaths. One never became accustomed to the deaths. All the bright young lives who followed him with courage and hope, because their hunger for knowledge and life was as great as his own. Only for them the following brought no joy, only, "I am sorry to have to tell you... Gave their lives with courage in the performance of their duty..." Fumbling words to break the news of the death of a loved one. The responsibility for those lives and those deaths went with the job. He knew that. He would know it again, but just now it wearied him.

"Lieutenant Uhura, would you be so kind as to log me off the bridge. Mr. Spock, you have the con. If I'm needed I shall be in my quarters." If he ever got there. He was asleep on his feet.

"Captain," Spock said as he moved down from his console to the command chair, "there is an unfinished game of chess still outstanding. If you would care to join me later in my quarters?"

Jim considered for a moment. Spock hardly ever spoke of off-duty matters on the bridge, but - perceptive as ever - it appeared that he had accurately gauged his Captain's mood and was trying to draw him out of it. Warmed by his friend's unspoken concern, Kirk smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Spock, I believe I would enjoy that very much indeed."

* * * * *

"Sir?" The Communications Officer's voice sounded tentative. "The Enterprise is signalling that she is now turning to avoid crossing into the Neutral Zone." He listened a moment longer then continued, "She also repeats her warning that in future we should do likewise." He hesitated, aware of the charged nature of the silence and afraid of being the mouthpiece for such peremptory orders. "Do you wish me to acknowledge?"

"No."

In answer to the unspoken question in his second in command's carefully neutral expression, Kereth said, "There is no need to give them the satisfaction. Damaged and out-gunned as we are, we can do no other, and they will undoubtedly monitor our progress to be certain. Set course for Klinzhai."

"Aye, sir," the Navigator acknowledged.

None of the crew raised their heads or even glanced at their Captain, but Kereth could smell their fear and resentment, rank and stale. When he reached Klinzhai he would die, and some of them would die with him, executed by an Empire which would not admit to the possibility of failure. But he would not go cringing like a kuve into the dark; he would confront it as he had confronted adverse fortune all his life, face to face and unafraid. He rose and left the bridge, not needing the viewscreen, seeing in his mind's eye the graceful lift of the Enterprise, the swift gleam of her running lights filling the screen as she peeled away, escort duty done.

He walked along the neck of the ship and into the laboratory. Surprisingly, it was occupied. Kaltren was bent over a console, carefully dismantling equipment. His was the genius that had developed the mind control units, and these machines were the back-up for the control monitors now lying abandoned in the mines. Genius would not save Kaltren now, but still he would not leave his work badly done. Neither man spoke. Kaltren was one of that rare

breed who offered his unconditional loyalty to his commanding officer and the Empire. He accepted that he, like his Captain, was but a piece in the great game, the Khomer Zha, the Empire played against the Federation, and he offered neither criticism nor recrimination. Kereth would regret his death.

Kereth stepped forward. As he had hoped, a lone green light still blinked steadily on the console. Kaltren looked up sharply as Kereth activated the controls.

"What are you doing? It is finished. Over. Only that one experimental unit remains active, and the degree of control is uncertain."

Kereth looked up at him and smiled, his face oddly peaceful. It was right that Kaltren's work should play a part in what he planned to do.

"I know. This one is all I need. Revenge is a dish that is best served cold. Death is very cold. I am going to kill James T. Kirk."

* * * * *

It was warm and quiet in the Vulcan's quarters. *No, not quiet*, Kirk amended. There were the same intermittent clicks as the deck plates flexed and settled, the same gentle hum of the air conditioning, the same faint creaks of furniture built for lightness rather than strength. In short, the same assortment of background noises as in his own cabin, but here they simply added to the quality of stillness, as though the whole cabin partook of its owner's inner serenity. Jim could feel the tensions and frustrations of the last week running out of him like spring meltwater. He yawned and stretched expansively. It was good just to allow himself the luxury of feeling tired.

Spock flicked a questioning eyebrow at him. "If you are tired, Captain...?"

Jim shook his head. "No, I may finish the evening just as tired and irritable as I've been all day, but at least it will only be at the shortcomings of my game."

Spock nodded. "Some k'vass, then, before we begin?"

Kirk agreed with some enthusiasm. Spock drank rarely and abstemiously, but the light dry Vulcan liquor which he offered was more than acceptable to Human palates.

The game was a leisurely one, interspersed with desultory conversation and long companionable silences, devoid of their usual fierce competition to such an extent that Jim was momentarily surprised when Spock tipped his king in acknowledgement of defeat.

"Mate in three moves, I believe, Captain." He made to rise. "Would you care for another drink?"

"I'm not sure that I should. That potion of yours is worse than one of McCoy's. 'The Leith police dismisseth us'," he continued experimentally. "I can probably even still say 'Cessation'." He grinned and nodded. "Yeah, okay, I'll take you up on that, Spock. I doubt if I'll have to make any vital decisions tonight, but I still don't want to end up falling-down drunk."

Spock's face contrived to register blank incomprehension without moving a muscle. "Captain, I fail to understand in what way relegation by a Scottish constabulary is connected with the continued consumption of alcohol."

Jim laughed. "On the whole, I'd say it's probably better if you never need to find out."

The Vulcan rose to his feet to refill their glasses. Still smiling, Jim turned back to the board to set up the pieces. What subliminal signal warned him he never knew, but he turned and saw with pinpoint clarity the space on the wall where the S'Harien knife should have hung, and Spock standing behind him, his face tormented, light running like water down the blade in his hand.

Kirk started to move, but his head was dragged back by a strength against which he had no recourse. There was a soggy thump and a tearing pain in his chest. Agony seared through his body. He cried out at the pain, and the greater pain of betrayal, then the blinding red brilliance flared out suddenly into darkness. Far away, it seemed, a point of brightness beckoned him, and hesitantly he began to move towards it.

The sickening impact and relentless upward slash of the blow released Spock. Slowly the white-out of pain and the terrible sense of *Otherness* faded from his mind and he returned from the far distant vantage point from which he had been forced to watch as a being both himself and not himself butchered his Captain.

Dropping to his knees he felt carefully at the throat. No carotid pulse. Instinct made him lunge up over the crumpled body to slam a hand down on the intercom switch.

"Dr. McCoy to Commander Spock's quarters, Emergency Nine!"

Slowly he knelt again by Kirk's body and rolled him over. Blood soaked the gold uniform and the carpet, gleaming slick and black in the overhead lighting. The hazel eyes were half open, but there was no trace of life in them. Briefly Spock considered a mind meld, but his hands were shaking uncontrollably and his mental disciplines were gone. Kirk's injuries were too severe to permit any of the standard forms of resuscitation, but as a faint hope Spock turned his Captain's head slightly to clear the airway and then, with infinite care and prompted by an impulse he could not have identified, brushed back the stray lock of hair from the quiet face.

After a long time, it seemed, his brain began to function again. *I am insane*, he thought dully. *There can be no other explanation. I am insane and I have killed my Captain. This time there is no trick, no mistake. My friend is dead... Jim is dead!*

Grief was a hard knot in his chest that threatened to choke him. He clamped down on it fiercely. To give way now would be to cloud his thinking. The man who had taught him the value of his Human half lay dead or dying. Now, he would be Vulcan. His next action would be Vulcan - wholly Vulcan, and flawlessly logical.

He was dishonoured and foresworn, and though he had tried to ignore it Human grief supported his Vulcan resolve. The law, however ancient, was quite specific. The blade of the S'Harien was wet with blood, but the rough kahs-hu stone of the hilt slid as cool and sure to his hand as the day it was quarried.

The pain of the blow made him gasp. Deliberately he drew the knife slowly upwards so that the pain soared to ecstasy. Calmly he drew it to himself, analysed and accepted it, the last sensory input he would receive before he sank down into the friendly dark. Kneeling still, he set aside the pain. Dispassionately he considered his action and found it logical and just. A wrong had been done and restitution must be made. Consciousness was slipping and there was too little time. McCoy would arrive within moments. He would use the medical override to enter, in time perhaps to save Kirk's life, but for himself there must be no such interference. Therefore he set his hand to the knife again, laying the blade along the femoral artery. The blade was almost too sharp for him to feel the cut, but the blood spurted hot over his hands. Unconsciousness was moments away. In thirty seconds he would be dead. He did

not even hear McCoy's voice shouting as he hammered on the door.

* * * * *

Chief Medical Officer Leonard McCoy walked blindly into his office and dropped into a chair. After a moment he glanced down at his hands and saw that they were trembling. *Reaction*, said the dispassionate, medical part of his mind, the part that was still functioning. Reaction to the hours of gruelling surgery needed to put back together two living beings who were also his friends. *I need a drink*, he thought wearily, but the bottle was in the cabinet on the other side of the room, and he was just too damned tired.

Someone tapped on the door. He lifted his head and forced his eyes to focus. Scotty was standing uncertainly in the doorway, his homely face creased in lines of anxiety.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Doctor, but they said you'd finished surgery, and I just wondered..."

"That's okay, Scotty. Jim's gonna be fine." He saw the tension ease on the other man's face.

"And Mr. Spock?"

"He's still with us."

The smile that lit the Chief Engineer's face was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. "I'm not the only man aboard the Enterprise who deserves the reputation of a miracle worker."

"Thanks, Scotty, but no thanks. If I'd done my job properly to begin with, this would never have happened."

"Whisht, mon, that's tiredness talking."

"Yes, and a bad conscience. I gave in. If I'd picked one more fight with Spock and made him submit that damned pride of his to a medical, my instruments would have picked this up straight away." He pushed the tiny mind control unit across the desk.

"Och, so that's what it was." Scott turned the tiny device thoughtfully between finger and thumb, then looked up to meet McCoy's eyes squarely. "You know, Len, only the Good Lord gets it right one hundred percent of the time; the rest of us just have to do the best we can. I saw what you and Thau M'Benga did for those colonists, and no man could have done better." His gaze held for a moment longer, then with sudden briskness he continued, "What you need is a drink."

Slowly McCoy smiled. "Thanks, Scotty, you're right." He stood up to fetch a bottle and glasses. "I do need a drink. With a friend. Will you join me?"

* * * * *

Hearing returned first, the soft harmony of diagnostic sensors, and a muted light behind his closed eyelids. Sickbay. There was pain too, lying in a tight band across his chest, held at a distance like something half remembered - the effect of drugs. And the rustle of fabric on fabric as someone moved near him. Jim opened his eyes and tried to focus.

"Hush, take it easy now." McCoy's voice quieted him.

Memory came tumbling disordered back to him. The Klingons... a planet... a fight... Spock. "Spock!"

"Spock will be just fine, and so will you if you give me a little co-operation." McCoy's face swam into focus.

"What happened, Bones?" Jim was amazed at how inadequate his own voice sounded. McCoy, it seemed, had to lean down to hear him properly.

"I'm afraid this is all my fault, Jim. I had to take this out of him." McCoy held up a diminutive object between finger and thumb, which Kirk's swimming vision identified as a mind control unit. "That was why Spock attacked you. It never occurred to me that they would have given him one. He tried to kill himself when he saw what he'd done."

"No!"

"Don't panic. He's still alive, and I have every intention that he remain so. You can have my hide once you've recovered enough to peel it off in strips, but in the meantime I'll give you something to make you sleep."

Slowly Jim shook his head. Every movement hurt. "No, I don't want to sleep again just yet."

McCoy looked dubious. "Any pain? Okay, I'll leave you for the moment, but I'll be within call."

Left alone, Jim relaxed in the drowsy languor that is partly the after effect of shock. He was warm and comfortable, his most urgent question, the reason for Spock's attack, had been answered. A feeling of unease stirred. He paused, trying to think. It was hard to concentrate with McCoy's drugs fogging his mind, but the feeling persisted. Slowly and deliberately he focussed on it, reaching beyond the emotion for the underlying reason. Not a threat, a danger, but a lack, something missing, something that he lived with so closely all his daily life that he could only identify it by its absence - the constant subliminal awareness of another living presence suddenly withdrawn. Unease became a clamour of alarm. Spock! McCoy had lied to him. There was something drastically wrong. Shock and fear cleared his head.

He lay on a sickbay bed, his only restraint a transfusion unit providing a drip. Awkwardly one handed he detached the needle, sat up and swung his feet to the floor, fighting the dizziness and nausea that hit him like a sledgehammer and threatened to cut his feet from under him.

He had made it to the door when McCoy erupted from his office.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I must see Spock."

"I didn't spend the last three hours patching you together for you to go and wreck it in the next three minutes! Get back in that bed!"

Kirk clung to the door frame and his point with equal tenacity. "I have to see Spock now. Please, Bones." His legs were giving way and he had no strength left with which to argue.

McCoy's face softened.

* * * * *

The lights of the side ward in which Spock had been placed were dimmed, and the sounds of the medical sensors were no more than a murmur. The Vulcan lay surrounded by medical equipment, none of which made any sense to Kirk. He moved forward to look down at his friend. Sleeping, the angular face on the pillow was less guarded than when awake, more relaxed, more vulnerable.

Behind him McCoy said gently, "Don't let his appearance worry you. He's still under the effect of the anaesthetic, and that always makes people look like death warmed over."

Kirk felt the panic inside him recede a little. Spock was alive and safe; healing was just a matter of time. He turned carefully, abruptly aware of his own weakness. McCoy was speaking, Jim could see his lips moving, but the meaning was lost in the rushing sound filling his ears and swelling inside his head until it engulfed him. McCoy caught him as he fell.

For a long while thereafter reality seemed distorted in a way over which he had no control, as though he drifted in and out of another dimension, unable to communicate with the real world. In brief moments of lucidity he was aware of McCoy sitting by his bed. He tried to talk to him, but found that he had no voice. And Spock was there. Jim called out to him in relief, but the brown eyes were no longer gentle, and Spock answered in Kereth's voice. "I shall have my revenge, James Kirk." And light glinted on the knife blade in his hand as he turned away. Then Jim slept for a long time.

When he woke his head was clear and the room no longer appeared to shape-shift around him. There was a nurse seated in the chair beside him, but on hearing him move she got up and moved out of his field of vision, and within a few moments McCoy was there.

The doctor looked tired. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes and lines of strain etched deeply in his face. Nevertheless he smiled. "How do you feel, Jim?"

"Like I've just spent a week on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet."

"That bad, huh?"

"How's Spock?"

"Marginally more healthy than you are at this moment. You had me a smidgin worried there for a while, Jim. All that traipsing around you insisted on doing didn't help either. Now I know you've only just woken up, but just in case you're tempted to do any more, I'm going to give you something to put you back to sleep again."

He moved round round out of sight for a moment, then Jim heard the hiss of a hypo and had time to feel a prickling rush of warmth in his arm before he sank back into a deep healing sleep.

* * * * *

It was a further three days before McCoy would permit him to leave his bed, and if the doctor was reticent on the subject of Spock's progress Kirk had too many troubles of his own to notice. The slightest activity tired him, and an initial foray around the small ward left him exhausted.

"Bones, what's the matter with me? I'm as weak as a kitten," he grumbled when the doctor next appeared. "Can't you do something?"

McCoy surveyed him critically and grunted. "Let that be a lesson to you. I'm a doctor, not a miracle worker, Jim, and you're a Starship Captain, not Superman - though you don't always realise it," he added with a grin. "I've repaired the physical damage, but you can't expect to go charging off righting intergalactic wrongs until your body's recovered from the trauma it's been put through, and that takes time."

"Not too much, I hope, or I'll be dead from boredom."

McCoy sighed. "Okay, I'll do a deal with you. Behave sensibly and I'll sign you fit for light duties - and I mean light; and if you're looking for something else useful to do to fill your time, you can always come down here and talk to Spock."

"You mean he's still in sickbay?"

McCoy looked a trifle grim. "I mean he's still unconscious."

"Why in god's name didn't you tell me sooner?"

"And what could you have done except worry?"

Jim managed to reach the side ward under his own steam and hoped that McCoy would not notice the trembling in his legs as he slid into the chair at the bedside. The Vulcan remained disturbingly unchanged, a still and passive figure in a regulation sickbay coverall. Jim felt his original anxiety rise up to haunt him again.

All the readings on the diagnostic panels were deceptively normal. McCoy ran a practised eye over the scales and the corners of his mouth turned down.

"I have to confess I don't understand it. We've set right as much of the physical damage as we can, and he's healing slowly but quite satisfactorily. There's no sign of brain damage, no indication of anything abnormal at all if it comes to that, except that he hasn't induced a healing trance, and our 'Sleeping Beauty' won't wake up. With Scotty's agreement I've put in a medical priority override request to have us relieved of this patrol so we can take him to Vulcan. Maybe they can do something for him."

Jim nodded. "And?" he prompted.

"It seems as though there's a limit to what a medical priority override can override. They're working on it, but they can't spare us yet. So in the meantime we keep trying. I've given orders that every member of my staff who has anything to do with Spock should talk to him as though he was fully conscious and understood every word. That's where you might be able to help, Jim. You're as close to him as anyone. While you're on light duties, if you've got a few minutes to spare, talk to him. Doesn't matter what about, just talk to him. Somehow, somewhere, there has to be a way to get through to him and bring him home."

* * * * *

McCoy's suggestion set the pattern for Kirk's days as he fought his way back to complete fitness and slowly gathered up the reins of command again. Every spare minute he possessed was spent down in sickbay with Spock.

He and McCoy alternated like clock weights. What it was the doctor found to say to his long-time sparring partner and friend Jim never had the temerity to ask. For his own part he ranged through every topic under the sun and beyond it. Progress reports on the welfare of the ship, on the science departments, through the day-to-day events and happenings, trivia of shipboard life, to the minor and personal issues that he could only find it in himself to discuss with the Vulcan. A slow and relentless flow of words, laying siege to the still and apparently empty carapace which nonetheless still housed the spirit of his friend. All with the same unvarying result.

"It's no use, is it, my friend?" he said one day, having slipped in for a few minutes during his mid-watch break. "Either you don't hear me, or you won't listen, and I can't believe that. You always heard me out before, no matter how misguided you thought I was. I'm going to give 'Fleet one more day, then I'll back McCoy's medical override priority with a photon torpedo."

McCoy waylaid him at the door as he was leaving. "Can I have a word for a moment, Jim?"

"Yes, as long as you're not going to start nagging me about working too hard."

McCoy half smiled. "I presume that's guilt talking, so for the moment you can take the lecture as read. Actually, I was about to give you something else to do." He led the way into his office and carefully closed the door behind them. "I need you to follow up my request for relief, or at least some kind of medical courier to get Spock to Vulcan. I've pushed as hard as I can, and all I get is a load of static about them not being able to spare us. Jim, it's a lot more urgent now. There's a high probability that we're going to lose Spock."

"What?" Kirk stopped dead as though he had run into a wall. "Doctor, you told me that he was healing well."

McCoy reached into his desk drawer and produced a bottle and glasses. He slopped a shot of brandy into both glasses and passed one to Kirk. "I repaired the physical damage, yes, but this has nothing to do with those injuries. This is a systematic weakening of all his bodily functions." He paused to take a mouthful of brandy. "Jim, I am convinced that Spock is willing himself to die."

Kirk accepted the glass McCoy held out to him and drank almost without knowing what he did. "Now hold on a minute, Bones. I understood that Vulcans don't even have a word for suicide, and yet here you are telling me that Spock is killing himself. What makes you think that it's deliberate?"

"It was M'Benga who told me. You know he interned on Vulcan? Yes, well evidently he did some homework. Apparently it's an obscure custom dating from just post-Surak, when the rule of logic and non-violence had been accepted, but with occasional aberrant behaviour. If the aberration committed was thought to be too great, the Family Council would inform the guilty party that they considered his behaviour to be un-Vulcan, and basically invite him to execute himself. The offender would put himself into a trance which deepened into coma, followed by the failure of the bodily functions and death. Not a hand was raised in anger. The Council had shed no blood because the act was voluntary. The victim could not be held responsible because he had acceded to the request of the Council. Thus honour was satisfied, and all totally, cold-bloodedly logical."

"Bones, are you trying to tell me that on the strength of something that the Klingons did to him, for which he was not in any way responsible, and supported by some research of M'Benga's into an obscure and ancient Vulcan custom, you're saying that Spock's turned his face to the wall?"

"Actually it's not quite all, Jim." McCoy sighed and sat down heavily. "Do you remember the first time we went to Vulcan?"

"I'm not likely to forget it."

"No, well. After he thought he'd killed you Spock went across to speak to T'Pol. I was getting ready to beam up, and to be honest I was too concerned about getting you to sickbay to pay much attention, but I do remember this. T'Pol gave the customary salute, 'Live long and prosper, Spock', but it's his reply that sticks in my mind. 'I shall do neither, for I have killed my Captain and my friend.' It kinda made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I remember thinking it was odd because Starfleet would never have demanded the death penalty, particularly with such mitigating circumstances. When we got back to the ship, between one thing and another it went clean out of my head, and I can't say I've thought about it much since, until now. But in this context it does make a kind of appalling sense. I'm not a Vulcan, and I don't pretend to think like a Vulcan, thank god, but since you ask - yes, I believe

that if you had died by his hand that day, regardless of what interpretation 'Fleet may have chosen to put on the facts, Spock would have killed himself and considered it a just execution."

Jim took a long pull of brandy and sat unmoving, watching the amber fluid in his glass, his face averted from McCoy. When he next looked up his face was quite composed - until McCoy caught the expression in his eyes. "I think," Kirk said quietly, "that I had better go and talk to Starfleet."

It was nearly two hours before he returned to sickbay. As he walked through the door his face told McCoy all he needed to know. Nevertheless the doctor waited until Kirk dropped wearily into the chair in his office.

"A week," Kirk said. "That's the best Buchinsky can do. Yorktown's refit is all but complete and then she'll be sent straight out here to relieve us, but in the meantime, we wait."

The corners of McCoy's mouth turned down. "A week's too long, Jim. He's slipping fast, and I can't hold him."

"Can't you put him on total life support? You've done it to me before now, and I'm still here."

"I'm sorry, Jim, I can't. Spock's a Vulcan. Oh, I know I've kidded him along about his Human half often enough, but his Vulcan genes are dominant. Physically he's much closer to his father's people than his mother's. Spock has voluntary control over aspects of his body's functions that you and I take for granted just happen. Conversely his body is that much more dependant on his brain. A Human's body can be kept 'alive' long after the brain is diagnosed as dead. With a Vulcan you simply can't do that."

"Is there nothing at all we can do?"

"Short of breaking orders and making a fast dash for Vulcan - no. If we had another telepath aboard they might be able to get through to him, but even then I'm not sure that we should ask any telepath to take the risk."

"Bones, he's dying!"

"Precisely. Spock's the expert on this, but as near as I can make out, a mind link would probably happen fairly easily on an instinctive level, but whoever linked with him would have to probe so deeply that they might not be able to pull back. If the meld was unsuccessful Spock could take them with him when he went. In any case, I'm not wholly convinced it would make any difference, if Spock believes that he's morally guilty of attempted murder and he's literally willing himself to death. The fact that he did not actually succeed may not matter to him. He's certainly guilty of the intention, if not the deed."

"Hell, Bones, what does the intention matter?"

McCoy lifted one shoulder eloquently. "It matters to Spock."

Kirk slammed one fist into the palm of the other, prowling the room restlessly. "Last time I broke orders to take Spock to Vulcan we missed an inauguration ceremony, a load of pomp and circumstance and ego-massage for the new ruler. This time there's not a thing I can do. Patrolling the Klingon border is different, with or without the Organians. Our pulling out would leave the populations of a dozen planets open to Klingon attack. I can't do it, and I'm not sure that the Vulcans would agree to help us if I did. 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.' How many times have you heard Spock say that? It wouldn't be logical. If Spock is castigating himself with guilt over my near-death, can you imagine what his reaction would be to my putting

millions at risk in order to save one man? Even if he is my friend."

In the midst of their worry both men smiled at the thought. Tired and sick with anxiety, Jim dragged a hand across his face to clear the cobwebs from his mind. A hand fell on his shoulder and he glanced up.

"Doctor's orders, Jim; go and get some rest. It's not that long since you were seriously ill, and tearing yourself apart with worry isn't going to help Spock. You've a Starship to run, Captain. Four hundred and twenty-eight other crewpeople depend on your decisions, and you can't make sound ones with a head full of lactic acid by-products!" he continued more gently, "Don't worry, I'll call you if there's any change. Do you want anything to help you sleep?"

Kirk rose, stiff with weariness. "No, I could sleep on a rope." He paused by the door and looked back. McCoy's face was pinched with fatigue, the sooty swipes beneath his eyes dark against the pallor of his skin. "Why don't you take some of your own prescription, Bones?"

McCoy pushed a distracted hand through his already disordered hair. "Maybe I will shortly, but not yet. I'm okay."

"Bones, you're blaming yourself for something that's simply not your fault. Most of the time Spock's the expert on what treatment he needs, and there was no way you could know that this time he'd got it wrong. Get a nurse to sit with him. Put M'Benga on call if it makes you feel any better - and you get some sleep. Captain's orders!"

McCoy managed a tired smile and sketched a half salute. "Aye aye, Doctor Kirk, sir."

* * * * *

Back in his quarters Kirk threw his shirt in the general direction of the re-cycler and himself onto the bed, to gaze sightlessly up at the ceiling. Eventually he extinguished the light and lay staring wide-eyed into the unchanging dark.

Memory turned softly like the pages of a well loved book. When, during all those years, had he come to realise that beneath the cold and formal Vulcan exterior was a being of warmth and humour and great worth? When had mutual respect deepened to liking and liking to friendship? He smiled quietly into the darkness. So many memories...

Spock, hanging upside down in that ridiculous tree. Spock, a man of integrity in two universes. Spock, reluctant warrior and loyal friend, the beacon of his soul, waiting quietly at his side to be consulted and talked to; to reason, to counsel, to understand. Spock lying in sickbay, inexorably dying for a crime of which he believed himself to be guilty...

"No!"

Kirk rolled on his side and buried his face in the cool pillow, but even there the images pursued him. He punched the pillow in frustration, angry at his own helplessness. *Fine friend you are, James T.* If their positions had been reversed Spock would have found a way to help. How many times had he helped already? "My mind to your mind..." To heal, restore and protect. Always had, always wou-

No. Don't think about that. If there was only another telepath on board, they might stand a chance. "My mind to your mind..."

And the thought which had been worrying away at his subconscious surfaced with a blinding clarity that brought him bolt upright on the bed, staring into

the darkness until the sensor switch, alerted by his sudden movement, raised the lights.

* * * * *

McCoy, it seemed, was taking his own good advice, for sickbay was deserted when Kirk entered. Only a thin paring of light showed beneath the door of the room where the duty doctor sometimes snatched a few hours sleep during quiet periods.

Nurse Lia Burke was reading in a pool of lamplight by Spock's bed. She smiled and rose when she saw the Captain. "Dr. M'Benga's on duty, sir. Would you like me to fetch him?"

Jim shook his head and gestured to the still figure beside them. "If it's all right, I'd like to sit with him for a bit."

"Of course." She gathered up her book. "I'll be in the main surgery when you need me."

Jim slipped into the vacated chair and looked at his friend. Sickness had pared away the flesh of the ascetic face to a montage of planes and angles. The hands on the sheet were still. Long musician's fingers, the tendons fine drawn even in repose, the veins jade green beneath the skin. The pulse in the throat fluttered fast and light as a watchmaker's balance wheel, the only indication of life. Kirk was assailed by a wave of desolation. Gradually it subsided and in its wake came anger and a fierce resentment which railed against the injustice that Spock should die and Kereth should win, and that all they had struggled to achieve should count for nothing. The anger hardened his resolve.

He wondered momentarily whether he was wrong not to have called McCoy, but the doctor would most certainly disapprove of the risk he was taking. The gravelly voice echoed in his memory. "Whoever melds with Spock would have to probe so deep that they might not be able to pull back. Spock could take them with him when he went."

Slowly Kirk extended his hand and laid his fingers to Spock's face, their tips touching the nerve points. Carefully, deliberately, he suppressed the turmoil in his mind, striving for a peace and an inner stillness that he was very far from feeling, then *Reached* out, projecting with all his mental strength his need to contact his friend.

The sweat started on his forehead. In the long silence which followed he became aware of the minute nighttime sounds of the ship: the quiet chirrup of the instruments; the creak and click of the deck plates of the ship shifting and settling around him; the subliminal sound that was almost a feeling, the leashed power of the mighty engines far below his feet. A dozen different noises, bulking large in the stillness, breaking his peace and destroying his concentration so that he sat, dejected, in the here and now, all effort spent.

Jim's shoulders slumped. He was no telepath. Never had been, never would be. The melds he had experienced had always been initiated by Spock. He didn't even know what he was *Reaching* for. He only knew how it felt. He drew a long, slow breath and then expelled it abruptly in a sound that was almost a laugh. The answer was, of course, flawlessly logical.

He knew how it felt!

Spock's hand lay relaxed on the sheet. Gently Jim raised it to his temple, feeling the warm, familiar touch against his face. With it came the memory of that cool, precise voice. "Reach out, but let me control. Without full training it is easy to project too far and hence become 'lost' in the meld."

//Reach out.//

Spock's hand seemed to become heavy against his face. Heavier, stronger, dominating his whole perception. His entire being thrummed like a guitar string plucked. *This is how a radio antenna must feel when the signal hits it*, he thought inconsequentially.

There was no warning. A moment's wrenching disorientation, and his mind was no longer his own.

Blackness and PAIN - numbing, crushing, searing pain - lancing along his nerves, battering his mind, beyond conscious thought or reason.

He screamed and instinctively pulled back, breaking contact. Reality reformed around him and he was alone in the ship's night with the sweat drying cold on his skin and his heart thudding like a trip hammer against his ribs.

For a moment Jim thought he had screamed aloud, and waited for the uproar, but the silence remained unbroken, and he realised that the sound had only been in his mind. He sat in the pool of quiet lamplight until the shuddering that wracked his body gradually subsided and rational thought returned.

There was in that savage onslaught no trace of the ordered meld techniques his gentle friend normally used. This, it seemed, was a purely instinctive response to his own mental demand to meld.

Well, you got what you wanted, Jim, he told himself. Uncontrolled and painful the link might have been, but it was more of a response than anyone had elicited from the Vulcan in the last three weeks. *You wanted contact*, he thought ruefully, *and you got it. Now it's up to you to decide what to do about it.*

He looked down at the still, sleeping face of his friend, appalled at the agony of mind which lay behind its tranquil surface, and clasped his hands together to still their shaking. He was, he realised, more scared than he had ever been in the whole of his adult life.

//Think,// said the calm, detached part of his mind, the part that made command decisions. //Identify your fear. Give it a name. Know thine enemy.//

//But this isn't an enemy,// he thought desperately. //This is Spock, my friend, who is lost and trapped and needs my help. Who, in his right mind, has offered his life for mine a dozen times over.//

//Who,// said his treacherous subconscious, //tried to kill you three weeks ago and is not in his right mind - the meld proves that. His mind is highly trained and powerful, whilst you can only fumble by instinct.//

Unbidden, the memory rose again of the quiet voice and familiar mind touch. "Relax and open your mind to me, let me control... It is easy to become lost in the meld."

//And the truth is that I'm shit scared of dying in the turmoil of a deranged mind.//

//But you would willingly give your life for his in the heat of battle. Death is death, wherever you meet it. A difference which makes no difference is no difference. And he is still Spock.//

Kirk sighed. He knew with certainty what he must do. Carefully, he reached out to take up Spock's hand again and noticed, somehow without surprise, that his own was once again quite steady.

Once more pain needled his mind, making him gasp, but this time he was prepared. He steadied himself against it and slowly it subsided. He allowed himself a few moments to become accustomed to the contact, drew a long breath, and *Reached* further.

Memories battered like bird wings against his mind. Fragmented images, some too fleeting to make sense, and one which played and re-played with agonising slowness before him. He watched through Spock's eyes his own brief, desperate fight for life and felt, as clearly as if he had wielded it himself, the jarring impact as the knife struck home.

With it came waves of grief and guilt, sweeping over him, drowning out all rational thought, so that the tiny part of his mind which still retained an awareness of his own body was dimly conscious of wetness on his face, and he knew that he wept for a grief not his own.

Unskilled in meld techniques, Kirk clung grimly to his own identity as though to a lifeline and continued to *Reach* out, struggling to transmit his willingness, his need to communicate, while his heart ached for his friend's distress.

Beneath the unfamiliar turmoil of emotion he sensed a tension in Spock's mind, a determination, a channelling of mental strength towards an end, a purpose not yet attainable but almost within reach, as though the feelings uppermost in Spock's mind were released from their customary iron control and acknowledged, simply because to master them would require strength, and Spock had no strength left to spare.

Baffled and exhausted, Kirk allowed himself to flow with this current of purpose, to look closer at what Spock strove so singlemindedly to attain. It seemed as though, standing at a distance, he looked across the storm-tossed layers of Spock's mind to an area of stillness and knew that here at last was peace, a promise of calm and order, logic and the end of striving. Soothed and comforted, Kirk drifted closer, slipping into the warm shallows of that promised peace.

And with cold certainty knew the truth. This was not peace, but passivity. What Spock sought was not safety but the annihilation of self, the quiet acceptance of death. Jim's mind recoiled in horror, and all the fierce love of life that was in him rose in rebellion.

//Spock - NO!//

His cry of outrage rang in the link, challenging and defiant, shattering the precision of Spock's thoughts, raging against this voluntary surrender of life. And for the first time met with a response. An awareness which gradually became a question.

//Jim? - JIM!//

Incredulity and joy blazed up like a brush fire, bright and warming as sunlight, so that Jim found himself smiling in response even as he said urgently,

//Spock, you must stop this now, before it's too late.//

Relief and joy still echoed in the link, but the brightness was gone, snuffed out, and Kirk sensed a drawing back.

//Captain, I may not. A wrong has been done and restitution must be made.//

//But why, Spock? I'm still alive!//

Profound regret coloured Spock's mind voice. //I have no choice.//

//I don't understand.//

Spock's own unique compassion tempered austere Vulcan logic as he answered gently, //Captain, Jim, my life is forfeit. I have betrayed thee twice, both as my Captain and as my t'hy'la. It is a double guilt.//

Here in the intimacy of the meld Jim understood, as though Vulcan-born himself, the Vulcan attitude to oath binding, which freely pledged an allegiance greater than any Starfleet would dare presume to demand, and considered death the only recompense acceptable for the betrayal of that oath. Through Spock's mind, too, for the first time he fully understood the complex blend of respect, unshakable loyalty and deep affection embodied in the term t'hy'la, which translated so inadequately as brother/friend. He tasted, as though it were his own, Spock's shame at having betrayed not merely his formal oath but his personal allegiance to his friend, coupled with an all-too-Human sadness, barely suppressed, that his actions must surely have destroyed the trust which had lain between them. The knowledge warmed Jim even as panic rose, tight in his throat, for Spock's mind-voice was weakening.

Jim *Reached* again, straining to maintain the link, sensed Spock desperately trying to separate them, and his own instinctive unease became a clamour of alarm overlaid by the recollection of McCoy's voice.

"... too far and Spock could take them with him when he goes..."

He tried again. //Spock, listen to me. You're not guilty. You didn't want to kill me.//

The reply, when it came, was as bleak as the desert wind. //The fact remains, Jim, I tried.//

The link was slipping. Jim could feel Spock's withdrawal, the beginning of his gentle slide towards death, and his temper, until then close-held, finally snapped.

//If you truly believe that, Spock, then you'd better finish what you started, because by god I will not let you go.//

Go back, go back! the warning voice of instinct cried as he flung himself forward to cleave to that other mind. A dark void opened before him and he plunged down into it, not knowing if he lived or died.

* * * * *

He awoke flailing in panic. He was falling, falling, stifling, drawn down into smothering darkness. There was no movement, no air, no LIFE! Something held him restrained and he fought it blindly, his lungs straining for air. Someone was speaking, the words repeated again and again until gradually the sense of them reached him.

"Hush, Jim. It's all right. It's all right. I've got you, you're safe now. It's all right."

McCoy's hands gripped his shoulders, anchoring him to reality, while he lay with his eyes closed, letting normality wash over him, and his heart slowly resumed its regular rhythm.

Kirk opened his eyes and flinched at the light. He had a headache, and his chest felt as though someone had used it as a springboard.

"Bones?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"How's Spock?"

"Sleeping normally."

"Are you sure?"

That earned him what could only be described as an old-fashioned look. "Of course I'm sure. He's safe, but don't you ever pull a stunt like that again." McCoy's blue eyes snapped with an anger which could not quite conceal the worry which had fuelled it.

"It worked, didn't it?"

As a piece of bravado that fooled neither of them. Jim felt as though he now knew the true meaning of terror.

"If your chest feels sore, it's because I had to give you cardiac massage. For three minutes you were clinically dead, Jim, and I'm still not sure what brought you back."

"I am," Kirk said shortly. "Can I see him, Bones?"

McCoy nodded and Kirk slid cautiously off the bed.

* * * * *

Spock still lay motionless and apparently unconscious, but there was a subtle change in the sleeping face. Where before there had been withdrawal, now there was endurance. However reluctantly, he would wake. As Jim sank onto the chair by the bed Spock's eyes opened, heavy lidded and bruised beneath the canted brows. Jim met their guarded expression with a lop-sided smile.

"Has anyone ever told you you have a vivid imagination, Mr. Spock?"

An answering amusement glimmered for a moment in the dark eyes and died again as memory returned.

"You brought me back... Why?"

"I rather thought the boot was on the other foot, but I'm not complaining. Dr. M'Benga told us you would die. It seemed the logical thing to do."

"I tried to kill you, Captain. My death is necessary and just."

"So you said. In case you hadn't noticed before, Mr. Spock, I'm still alive. No law in the galaxy could convict you of murder."

"It is Vulcan law."

"Vulcan law? That's not logic - that's lunacy!"

"The law has stood since the time of Surak. It recognises no difference between the attempt and the deed. Under Vulcan law, I am indeed guilty of your murder."

"But that wasn't you, Spock. You were under the influence of a Klingon mind control unit. They used you as a weapon. They aimed you at me. If you'd really wanted me dead, you could have killed me when we melded as easily as pinching out a candle. It was you who saved my life by calling Dr. McCoy to your cabin, and again just now. I would have died, would I not, if you hadn't brought us both back?"

Spock sighed and Kirk watched the agonising struggle as the Vulcan gathered his strength, rather as a man might scrape a bucket of water from a dry well in the Sas-a-shar desert. His voice, when it came, was scarcely audible.

"My intention does not exonerate me. No true Vulcan would allow his mind to be so overcome. My honour as a Vulcan is broken. It would be justice if I died."

"Bullshit," Kirk said succinctly. "They didn't have mind control techniques in Surak's time, so how would they know? You say it would be justice if you died. Why? What purpose would your death serve? Death is the abdication of responsibility, and I thought that Vulcan integrity counted for more than that. Death is easy, Spock. It's living that's hard. Facing the consequences of your actions. If you really believe that what you did demands that you make some kind of reparation, then your debt is to me, and I'm calling it in."

McCoy, who until then had stood silent, said urgently, "Jim, be careful!"

Kirk ignored him and continued relentlessly, "I'm not just *asking* that you live - I *demand* it!"

Spock flinched at the force of the words, and in apparent denial and rejection closed his eyes and turned his head away.

Fear and anger warred briefly in Kirk. Fear for Spock's safety; anger at the inflexible Vulcan code of honour which demanded that Spock should forfeit his life regardless of anything that he, Kirk, might say or do; and anger won out. All the grief and worry of the last three weeks rose up in him. He caught hold of the Vulcan's shoulders and shook him fiercely.

"Now you listen to me, Spock, and you listen good. I may only be an emotional Human, but right now I couldn't give a rap for Vulcan justice. I don't need logic or justice; I need my friend, whole and alive. I don't give a damn about ethics or accidents or anything else. I need you, Spock. You are my friend, and *nothing* will ever change that."

He broke off abruptly, releasing his grip, guiltily aware that through the physical contact he was forcing the Vulcan to experience the hopeless turmoil of emotion, the fear and grief and honest love for his friend that he had endured over the past three weeks. For a long moment he held his breath, fearing he had pushed too far; then the stained lids lifted, the dark eyes searched his face, and read truth there.

Slowly the Vulcan moved his hand to touch Kirk's clenched fist where it lay on the bedcover, as though seeking tactile confirmation that his friend still lived, and the Human opened his hand to catch the long fingers in a firm grip, a fleeting gesture completed as soon as it was begun, which nonetheless said more than words could ever do; and then it was back, that comforting mental presence that Kirk had so poignantly missed.

Jim felt the sharp sting of tears behind his eyelids, and his throat was unaccountably tight. From somewhere he found a smile, and the fact that it was closer to tears than to laughter seemed to matter not at all. He glanced up and saw McCoy hovering at a discreet distance. He swallowed hard to clear the constriction in his throat.

"Look, I've got to go now. Bones is beginning to prance and you need to rest. But I meant what I said. I need you, my friend. I shall always need you, so stick around, huh? And that's an order, Mister!"

As he rose to go the warmth of Spock's touch echoed the warmth that lingered in his mind. Sleep was already claiming the Vulcan, weighing his

eyelids, but his face was once more serene as he replied,

"In that case, Captain, I shall always be there."

